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THE
HOUSE IN THE MIST

By

ANNA KATHARINE GREEN

Author of
The Millionaire Baby
The Amethyst Box
The Filigree Ball, etc., etc.

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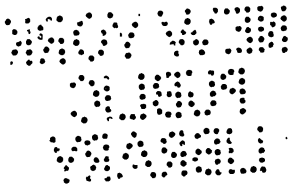

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THE HOUSE IN THE MIST

I

AN OPEN DOOR

It was a night to drive any man indoors. Not only was the darkness impenetrable, but the raw mist enveloping hill and valley made the open road anything but desirable to a belated wayfarer like myself.

Being young, untrammeled, and naturally indifferent to danger, I was not averse to adventure; and having my fortune to make, was always on the lookout for El Dorado, which, to ardent souls, lies ever beyond the next turning. Consequently, when I saw a light shimmering through the mist at my right, I resolved to make for it and the shelter it so opportunely offered.

But I did not realize then, as I do now, that shelter does not necessarily imply refuge, or I might not have undertaken this adventure

with so light a heart. Yet, who knows? The impulses of an unfettered spirit lean toward daring, and youth, as I have said, seeks the strange, the unknown and, sometimes, the terrible.

My path toward this light was by no means an easy one. After confused wanderings through tangled hedges, and a struggle with obstacles of whose nature I received the most curious impression in the surrounding murk, I arrived in front of a long, low building which, to my astonishment, I found standing with doors and windows open to the pervading mist, save for one square casement through which the light shone from a row of candles placed on a long mahogany table.

The quiet and seeming emptiness of this odd and picturesque building made me pause. I am not much affected by visible danger, but this silent room, with its air of sinister expectancy, struck me most unpleasantly, and I was about to reconsider my first impulse and withdraw again to the road, when a second look, thrown back upon the comfortable interior I

was leaving, convinced me of my folly and sent me straight toward the door which stood so invitingly open.

But half-way up the path, my progress was again stayed by the sight of a man issuing from the house I had so rashly looked upon as devoid of all human presence. He seemed in haste and, at the moment my eye first fell on him, was engaged in replacing his watch in his pocket.

But he did not shut the door behind him, which I thought odd, especially as his final glance had been a backward one, and seemed to take in all the appointments of the place he was so hurriedly leaving.

As we met, he raised his hat. This likewise struck me as peculiar, for the deference he displayed was more marked than that usually bestowed on strangers, while his lack of surprise at an encounter more or less startling in such a mist was calculated to puzzle an ordinary man like myself. Indeed, he was so little impressed by my presence there that he was for passing me without a word or any

other hint of good fellowship, save the bow of which I have spoken. But this did not suit me. I was hungry, cold, and eager for creature comforts, and the house before me gave forth not only heat, but a savory odor which in itself was an invitation hard to ignore. I therefore accosted the man.

"Will bed and supper be provided me here?" I asked. "I am tired out with a long tramp over the hills, and hungry enough to pay anything in reason—"

I stopped, for the man had disappeared. He had not paused at my appeal and the mist had swallowed him. But at the break in my sentence, his voice came back in good-natured tones and I heard:

"Supper will be ready at nine, and there are beds for all. Enter, sir; you are the first to arrive, but the others can not be far behind."

A queer greeting, certainly. But when I strove to question him as to its meaning, his voice returned to me from such a distance that I doubted if my words had reached him

with any more distinctness than his answer reached me.

"Well!" thought I, "it isn't as if a lodging had been denied me. He invited me to enter, and enter I will."

The house, to which I now naturally directed a glance of much more careful scrutiny than before, was no ordinary farm-building, but a rambling old mansion, made conspicuously larger here and there by jutting porches and more than one convenient lean-to. Though furnished, warmed and lighted with candles, as I have previously described, it had about it an air of disuse which made me feel myself an intruder, in spite of the welcome I had received. But I was not in a position to stand upon ceremony, and ere long I found myself inside the great room and before the blazing logs whose glow had lighted up the doorway and added its own attraction to the other allurements of the inviting place.

Though the open door made a draft which was anything but pleasant, I did not feel like closing it, and was astonished to observe the

effect of the mist through the square thus left open to the night. It was not an agreeable one, and, instinctively turning my back upon that quarter of the room, I let my eyes roam over the wainscoted walls and the odd pieces of furniture which gave such an air of old-fashioned richness to the place. As nothing of the kind had ever fallen under my eyes before, I should have thoroughly enjoyed this opportunity of gratifying my taste for the curious and the beautiful, if the quaint old chairs I saw standing about me on every side had not all been empty. But the solitude of the place, so much more oppressive than the solitude of the road I had left, struck cold to my heart, and I missed the cheer rightfully belonging to such attractive surroundings. Suddenly I bethought me of the many other apartments likely to be found in so spacious a dwelling, and, going to the nearest door, I opened it and called out for the master of the house. But only an echo came back, and, returning to the fire, I sat down before the cheering blaze, in quiet ac-

ceptance of a situation too lonely for comfort, yet not without a certain piquant interest for a man of free mind and adventurous disposition like myself.

After all, if supper was to be served at nine, someone must be expected to eat it: I should surely not be left much longer without companions.

Meanwhile ample amusement awaited me in the contemplation of a picture which, next to the large fireplace, was the most prominent object in the room. This picture was a portrait, and a remarkable one. The countenance it portrayed was both characteristic and forcible, and so interested me that in studying it I quite forgot both hunger and weariness. Indeed its effect upon me was such that, after gazing at it uninterruptedly for a few minutes, I discovered that its various features—the narrow eyes in which a hint of craft gave a strange gleam to their native intelligence; the steadfast chin, strong as the rock of the hills I had wearily tramped all day; the cunning wrinkles which yet did not

interfere with a latent great-heartedness that made the face as attractive as it was puzzling—had so established themselves in my mind that I continued to see them before me whichever way I turned, and found it impossible to shake off their influence even after I had resolutely set my mind in another direction by endeavoring to recall what I knew of the town into which I had strayed.

I had come from Scranton and was now, according to my best judgment, in one of those rural districts of western Pennsylvania which breed such strange and sturdy characters. But of this special neighborhood, its inhabitants and its industries, I knew nothing nor was likely to, so long as I remained in the solitude I have endeavored to describe.

But these impressions and these thoughts—if thoughts they were—presently received a check. A loud "Halloo" rose from somewhere in the mist, followed by a string of muttered imprecations, which convinced me that the person now attempting to approach the house was encountering some of the many

difficulties which had beset me in the same undertaking a few minutes before.

I therefore raised my voice and shouted out, "Here! this way!" after which I sat still and awaited developments.

There was a huge clock in one of the corners, whose loud tick filled up every interval of silence. By this clock it was just ten minutes to eight when two gentlemen (I should say men, and coarse men at that) crossed the open threshold and entered the house.

Their appearance was more or less noteworthy—unpleasantly so, I am obliged to add. One was red-faced and obese, the other was tall, thin and wiry and showed as many seams in his face as a blighted apple. Neither of the two had anything to recommend him either in appearance or address, save a certain veneer of polite assumption as transparent as it was offensive. As I listened to the forced sallies of the one and the hollow laugh of the other, I was glad that I was large of frame and strong of arm and used to all kinds of men and—brutes.

As these two new-comers seemed no more astonished at my presence than the man I had met at the gate, I checked the question which instinctively rose to my lips and with a simple bow,—responded to by a more or less familiar nod from either,—accepted the situation with all the *sang-froid* the occasion seemed to demand. Perhaps this was wise, perhaps it was not; there was little opportunity to judge, for the start they both gave as they encountered the eyes of the picture before mentioned drew my attention to a consideration of the different ways in which men, however similar in other respects, express sudden and unlooked-for emotion. The big man simply allowed his astonishment, dread, or whatever the feeling was which moved him, to ooze forth in a cold and deathly perspiration which robbed his cheeks of color and cast a bluish shadow over his narrow and retreating temples; while the thin and waspish man, caught in the same trap (for trap I saw it was), shouted aloud in his ill-timed mirth, the false and cruel character of which would have

made me shudder, if all expression of feeling on my part had not been held in check by the interest I immediately experienced in the display of open bravado with which, in another moment, these two tried to carry off their mutual embarrassment.

"Good likeness, eh?" laughed the seamy-faced man. "Quite an idea, that! Makes him one of us again! Well, he's welcome—in oils. Can't say much to us from canvas, eh?" And the rafters above him vibrated, as his violent efforts at joviality went up in loud and louder assertion from his thin throat.

A nudge from the other's elbow stopped him and I saw them both cast half-lowering, half-inquisitive glances in my direction.

"One of the Witherspoon boys?" queried one.

"Perhaps," snarled the other. "I never saw but one of them. There are five, aren't there? Eustace believed in marrying off his gals young."

"Damn him, yes. And he'd have married them off younger if he had known how num-

bers were going to count some day among the Westonhaughs." And he laughed again in a way I should certainly have felt it my business to resent, if my indignation as well as the ill-timed allusions which had called it forth had not been put to an end by a fresh arrival through the veiling mist which hung like a shroud at the doorway.

This time it was for me to experience a shock of something like fear. Yet the personage who called up this unlooked-for sensation in my naturally hardy nature was old and, to all appearance, harmless from disability, if not from good will. His form was bent over upon itself like a bow; and only from the glances he shot from his upturned eyes was the fact made evident that a redoubtable nature, full of force and malignity, had just brought its quota of evil into a room already overflowing with dangerous and menacing passions.

As this old wretch, either from the feebleness of age or from the infirmity I have mentioned, had great difficulty in walking, he

had brought with him a small boy, whose business it was to direct his tottering steps as best he could.

But once settled in his chair, he drove away this boy with his pointed oak stick, and with some harsh words about caring for the horse and being on time in the morning, he sent him out into the mist. As this little shivering and pathetic figure vanished, the old man drew, with gasp and haw, a number of deep breaths which shook his bent back and did their share, no doubt, in restoring his own disturbed circulation. Then, with a sinister twist which brought his pointed chin and twinkling eyes again into view, he remarked:

"Haven't ye a word for kinsman Luke, you two? It isn't often I get out among ye. Shakee, nephew! Shakee, Hector! And now who's the boy in the window? My eyes aren't what they used to be, but he don't seem to favor the Westonhaughs over-much. One of Salmon's four grandchildren, think 'e? Or a shoot from Eustace's gnarled old trunk? His gals all married Americans, and one of

them, I've been told, was a yellow-haired giant like this fellow."

As this description pointed directly toward me, I was about to venture a response on my own account, when my attention, as well as theirs, was freshly attracted by a loud "Whoa!" at the gate, followed by the hasty but assured entrance of a dapper, wizen, but perfectly preserved little old gentleman with a bag in his hand. Looking askance with eyes that were like two beads, first at the two men who were now elbowing each other for the best place before the fire, and then at the revolting figure in the chair, he bestowed his greeting, which consisted of an elaborate bow, not on them, but upon the picture hanging so conspicuously on the open wall before him; and then, taking me within the scope of his quick, circling glance, cried out with an assumption of great cordiality:

"Good evening, gentlemen; good evening one, good evening all. Nothing like being on the tick. I'm sorry the night has turned out so badly. Some may find it too thick for

travel. That would be bad, eh? very bad—for *them*."

As none of the men he openly addressed saw fit to answer, save by the hitch of a shoulder or a leer quickly suppressed, I kept silent also. But this reticence, marked as it was, did not seem to offend the new-comer. Shaking the wet from the umbrella he held, he stood the dripping article up in a corner and then came and placed his feet on the fender. To do this he had to crowd between the two men already occupying the best part of the hearth. But he showed no concern at incommoding them, and bore their cross looks and threatening gestures with professional equanimity.

"You know me?" he now unexpectedly snapped, bestowing another look over his shoulder at that oppressive figure in the chair. (Did I say that I had risen when the latter sat?) "I'm no Westonhaugh, I; nor yet a Witherspoon nor a Clapsaddle. I'm only Smead, the lawyer. Mr. Anthony Westonhaugh's lawyer," he repeated, with another

glance of recognition in the direction of the picture. "I drew up his last will and testament, and, until all of his wishes have been duly carried out, am entitled by the terms of that will to be regarded both legally and socially as his representative. This you all know, but it is my way to make everything clear as I proceed. A lawyer's trick, no doubt. I do not pretend to be entirely exempt from such."

A grumble from the large man, who seemed to have been disturbed in some absorbing calculation he was carrying on, mingled with a few muttered words of forced acknowledgment from the restless old sinner in the chair, made it unnecessary for me to reply, even if the last comer had given me the opportunity.

"It's getting late!" he cried, with an easy garrulity rather amusing, under the circumstances. "Two more trains came in as I left the depot. If old Phil was on hand with his wagon, several more members of this interesting family may be here before the clock

strikes; if not, the assemblage is like to be small. Too small," I heard him grumble a minute after, under his breath.

"I wish it were a matter of one," spoke up the big man, striking his breast in a way to make it perfectly apparent whom he meant by that word *one*. And having (if I may judge by the mingled laugh and growl of his companions) thus shown his hand both figuratively and literally, he relapsed into the calculation which seemed to absorb all of his unoccupied moments.

"Generous, very!" commented the lawyer in a murmur which was more than audible. "Pity that sentiments of such broad benevolence should go unrewarded."

This, because at that very instant wheels were heard in front, also a jangle of voices, in some controversy about fares, which promised anything but a pleasing addition to the already none too desirable company.

"I suppose that's sister Janet," snarled out the one addressed as Hector. There was no love in his voice, despite the relationship

hinted at, and I awaited the entrance of this woman with some curiosity.

But her appearance, heralded by many a puff and pant which the damp air exaggerated in a prodigious way, did not seem to warrant the interest I had shown in it. As she stepped into the room, I saw only a big frowsy woman, who had attempted to make a show with a new silk dress and a hat in the latest fashion, but who had lamentably failed, owing to the slouchiness of her figure and some misadventure by which her hat had been set awry on her head and her usual complacency destroyed. Later, I noted that her down-looking eyes had a false twinkle in them, and that, commonplace as she looked, she was one to steer clear of in times of necessity and distress.

She, too, evidently expected to find the door open and people assembled, but she had not anticipated being confronted by the portrait on the wall, and cringed in an unpleasant way as she stumbled by it into one of the ill-lighted corners.

The old man, who had doubtless caught the rustle of her dress as she passed him, emitted one short sentence.

"Almost late," said he.

Her answer was a sputter of words.

"It's the fault of that driver," she complained. "If he had taken one drop more at the half-way house, I might really not have got here at all. That would not have inconvenienced *you*. But oh! what a grudge I would have owed that skinflint brother of ours"—here she shook her fist at the picture —"for making our good luck depend upon our arrival within two short strokes of the clock!"

"There are several to come yet," blandly observed the lawyer. But before the words were well out of his mouth, we all became aware of a new presence—a woman, whose somber grace and quiet bearing gave distinction to her unobtrusive entrance, and caused a feeling of something like awe to follow the first sight of her cold features and deep, heavily-fringed eyes. But this soon passed in

the more human sentiment awakened by the soft pleading which infused her gaze with a touching femininity. She wore a long loose garment which fell without a fold from chin to foot, and in her arms she seemed to carry something.

Never before had I seen so beautiful a woman. As I was contemplating her, with respect but yet with a masculine intentness I could not quite suppress, two or three other persons came in. And now I began to notice that the eyes of all these people turned mainly one way, and that was toward the clock. Another small circumstance likewise drew my attention. Whenever any one entered,—and there were one or two additional arrivals during the five minutes preceding the striking of the hour,—a frown settled for an instant on every brow, giving to each and all a similar look, for the interpretation of which I lacked the key. Yet not on every brow either. There was one which remained undisturbed and showed only a grand patience.

As the hands of the big clock neared the

point of eight, a furtive smile appeared on more than one face; and when the hour rang out, a sigh of satisfaction swept through the room, to which the little old lawyer responded with a worldly-wise grunt, as he moved from his place and proceeded to the door.

This he had scarcely shut when a chorus of voices rose from without. Three or four lingerers had pushed their way as far as the gate, only to see the door of the house shut in their faces.

"Too late!" growled old man Luke from between the locks of his long beard.

"Too late!" shrieked the woman who had come so near being late herself.

"Too late!" smoothly acquiesced the lawyer, locking and bolting the door with a deft and assured hand.

But the four or five persons who thus found themselves barred out did not accept without a struggle the decision of the more fortunate ones assembled within. More than one hand began pounding on the door, and

we could hear cries of, "The train was behind time!" "Your clock is fast!" "You are cheating us; you want it all for yourselves!" "We will have the law on you!" and other bitter adjurations unintelligible to me from my ignorance of the circumstances which called them forth.

But the wary old lawyer simply shook his head and answered nothing; whereat a murmur of gratification rose from within, and a howl of almost frenzied dismay from without, which latter presently received point from a startling vision which now appeared at the casement where the lights burned. A man's face looked in, and behind it, that of a woman, so wild and maddened by some sort of heart-break that I found my sympathies aroused in spite of the glare of evil passions which made both of these countenances something less than human.

But the lawyer met the stare of these four eyes with a quiet chuckle, which found its echo in the ill-advised mirth of those about him; and moving over to the window where

they still peered in, he drew together the two heavy shutters which hitherto had stood back against the wall, and, fastening them with a bar, shut out the sight of this despair, if he could not shut out the protests which ever and anon were shouted through the key-hole.

Meanwhile, one form had sat through this whole incident without a gesture; and on the quiet brow, from which I could not keep my eyes, no shadows appeared save the perpetual one of native melancholy, which was at once the source of its attraction and the secret of its power.

Into what sort of gathering had I stumbled? And why did I prefer to await developments rather than ask the simplest question of any one about me?

Meantime the lawyer had proceeded to make certain preparations. With the help of one or two willing hands, he had drawn the great table into the middle of the room and, having seen the candles restored to their places, began to open his small bag and take from it a roll of paper and several flat docu-

ments. Laying the latter in the center of the table and slowly unrolling the former, he consulted, with his foxy eyes, the faces surrounding him, and smiled with secret malevolence, as he noted that every chair and every form were turned away from the picture before which he had bent with such obvious courtesy, on entering. I alone stood erect, and this possibly was why a gleam of curiosity was noticeable in his glance, as he ended his scrutiny of my countenance and bent his gaze again upon the paper he held.

"Heavens!" thought I. "What shall I answer this man if he asks me why I continued to remain in a spot where I have so little business." The impulse came to go. But such was the effect of this strange convocation of persons, at night and in a mist which was itself a nightmare, that I failed to take action and remained riveted to my place, while Mr. Smead consulted his roll and finally asked in a business-like tone, quite unlike his previous sarcastic speech, the names of those whom he had the pleasure of seeing before him.

The old man in the chair spoke up first.

"Luke Westonhaugh," he announced.

"Very good!" responded the lawyer.

"Hector Westonhaugh," came from the thin man.

A nod and a look toward the next.

"John Westonhaugh."

"Nephew?" asked the lawyer.

"Yes."

"Go on, and be quick; supper will be ready at nine."

"Eunice Westonhaugh," spoke up a soft voice.

I felt my heart bound as if some inner echo responded to that name.

"Daughter of whom?"

"Hudson Westonhaugh," she gently faltered. "My father is dead—died last night; —I am his only heir."

A grumble of dissatisfaction and a glint of unrelieved hate came from the doubled-up figure, whose malevolence had so revolted me.

But the lawyer was not to be shaken.

"Very good! It is fortunate you trusted

your feet rather than the train. And now you! What is your name?"

He was looking, not at me as I had at first feared, but at the man next to me, a slim but slippery youth, whose small red eyes made me shudder.

"William Witherspoon."

"Barbara's son?"

"Yes."

"Where are your brothers?"

"One of them, I think, is outside"—here he laughed;—"the other is—*sick*."

The way he uttered this word made me set him down as one to be especially wary of when he smiled. But then I had already passed judgment on him at my first view.

"And you, madam?"—this to the large, dowdy woman with the uncertain eye, a contrast to the young and melancholy Eunice.

"Janet Clapsaddle," she replied, waddling hungrily forward and getting unpleasantly near the speaker, for he moved off as she approached, and took his stand in the clear place at the head of the table.

"Very good, Mistress Clapsaddle. You were a Westonhaugh, I believe?"

"You *believe*, sneak-faced hypocrite that you are!" she blurted out. "I don't understand your lawyer ways. I like plain speaking myself. Don't you know me, and Luke and Hector, and—and most of us indeed, except that puny, white-faced girl yonder, whom, having been brought up on the other side of the Ridge, we have none of us seen since she was a screaming baby in Hildegarde's arms. And the young gentleman over there,"—here she indicated me—"who shows so little likeness to the rest of the family. He will have to make it pretty plain who his father was before we shall feel like acknowledging him, either as the son of one of Eustace's girls, or a chip from brother Salmon's hard old block."

As this caused all eyes to turn upon me, even *hers*, I smiled as I stepped forward. The lawyer did not return that smile.

"What is your name?" he asked shortly and sharply, as if he distrusted me.

"Hugh Austin," was my quiet reply.

"There is no such name on the list," snapped old Smead, with an authoritative gesture toward those who seemed anxious to enter a protest.

"Probably not," I returned, "for I am neither a Witherspoon, a Westonhaugh nor a Clapsaddle. I am merely a chance wayfarer passing through the town on my way west. I thought this house was a tavern, or at least a place I could lodge in. The man I met in the doorway told me as much, and so I am here. If my company is not agreeable, or if you wish this room to yourselves, let me go into the kitchen. I promise not to meddle with the supper, hungry as I am. Or perhaps you wish me to join the crowd outside; it seems to be increasing."

"No, no," came from all parts of the room. "Don't let the door be opened. Nothing could keep Lemuel and his crowd out if they once got foot over the threshold."

The lawyer rubbed his chin. He seemed to be in some sort of quandary. First he scru-

tinized me from under his shaggy brows with a sharp gleam of suspicion; then his features softened and, with a side glance at the young woman who called herself Eunice, (perhaps, because she was worth looking at, perhaps because she had partly risen at my words), he slipped toward a door I had before observed in the wainscoting on the left of the mantelpiece, and softly opened it upon what looked like a narrow staircase.

"We can not let you go out," said he; "and we can not let you have a finger in our viands before the hour comes for serving them; so if you will be so good as to follow this staircase to the top, you will find it ends in a room comfortable enough for the wayfarer you call yourself. In that room you can rest till the way is clear for you to continue your travels. Better, we can not do for you. This house is not a tavern, but the somewhat valuable property of—" He turned with a bow and smile, as every one there drew a deep breath; but no one ventured to end that sentence.

I would have given all my future prospects (which, by the way, were not very great) to remain in that room. The oddity of the situation; the mystery of the occurrence; the suspense I saw in every face; the eagerness of the cries I heard redoubled from time to time outside; the malevolence but poorly disguised in the old lawyer's countenance; and, above all, the presence of that noble-looking woman, which was the one off-set to the general tone of villainy with which the room was charged, filled me with curiosity, if I might call it by no other name, that made my acquiescence in the demand thus made upon me positively heroic. But there seemed no other course for me to follow, and with a last lingering glance at the genial fire and a quick look about me, which happily encountered hers, I stooped my head to suit the low and narrow doorway opened for my accommodation, and instantly found myself in darkness. The door had been immediately closed by the lawyer's impatient hand.

II

WITH MY EAR TO THE WAINSCOTING

No move more unwise could have been made by the old lawyer,—that is, if his intention had been to rid himself of an unwelcome witness. For, finding myself thrust thus suddenly from the scene, I naturally stood still instead of mounting the stairs, and, by standing still, discovered that though shut from sight I was not from sound. Distinctly through the panel of the door, which was much thinner, no doubt, than the old fox imagined, I heard one of the men present shout out:

"Well, that makes the number less by *one!*"

The murmur which followed this remark came plainly to my ears, and, greatly rejoicing over what I considered my good luck, I settled myself on the lowest step of the stairs in the hope of catching some word

which would reveal to me the mystery of this scene.

It was not long in coming. Old Smead had now his audience before him in good shape, and his next words were of a character to make evident the purpose of this meeting.

"Heirs of Anthony Westonhaugh, deceased," he began in a sing-song voice strangely unmusical, "I congratulate you upon your good fortune at being at this especial moment on the inner rather than outer side of your amiable relative's front door. His will, which you have assembled to hear read, is well known to you. By it his whole property—(not so large as some of you might wish, but yet a goodly property for farmers like yourselves)—is to be divided this night, share and share alike, among such of his relatives as have found it convenient to be present here between the strokes of half-past seven and eight. If some of our friends have failed us through sloth, sickness or the misfortune of mistaking the road, they have our sympathy, but they can not have *his dollars*."

"Can not have his dollars!" echoed a rasping voice which, from its smothered sound, probably came from the bearded lips of the old reprobate in the chair.

The lawyer waited for one or two other repetitions of this phrase (a phrase which, for some unimaginable reason, seemed to give him an odd sort of pleasure), then he went on with greater distinctness and a certain sly emphasis, chilling in effect but very professional:

"Ladies and gentlemen: Shall I read this will?"

"No, no! The division! the division! Tell us what we are to have!" rose in a shout about him.

There was a pause. I could imagine the sharp eyes of the lawyer traveling from face to face as each thus gave voice to his cupidity, and the thin curl of his lips as he remarked in a slow tantalizing way:

"There was more in the old man's clutches than you think."

A gasp of greed shook the partition

against which my ear was pressed. Some one must have drawn up against the wainscoting since my departure from the room. I found myself wondering which of them it was. Meantime old Smead was having his say, with the smoothness of a man who perfectly understands what is required of him.

"Mr. Westonhaugh would not have put you to so much trouble or had you wait so long if he had not expected to reward you amply. There are shares in this bag which are worth thousands instead of hundreds. Now, now! stop that! hands off! hands off! there are calculations to make first. How many of you are there? Count up, some of you."

"Nine!" called out a voice with such rapacious eagerness that the word was almost unintelligible.

"Nine." How slowly the old knave spoke! What pleasure he seemed to take in the suspense he purposely made as exasperating as possible!

"Well, if each one gets his share, he may count himself richer by two hundred thou-

sand dollars than when he came in here to-night."

Two hundred thousand dollars! They had expected no more than thirty. Surprise made them speechless,—that is, for a moment; then a pandemonium of hurrahs, shrieks and loud-voiced enthusiasm made the room ring, till wonder seized them again, and a sudden silence fell, through which I caught a far-off wail of grief from the disappointed ones without, which, heard in the dark and narrow place in which I was confined, had a peculiarly weird and desolate effect.

Perhaps it likewise was heard by some of the fortunate ones within! Perhaps one head, to mark which, in this moment of universal elation, I would have given a year from my life, turned toward the dark without, in recognition of the despair thus piteously voiced; but if so, no token of the same came to me, and I could but hope that she had shown, by some such movement, the natural sympathy of her sex.

Meanwhile the lawyer was addressing the

company in his smoothest and most sarcastic tones.

"Mr. Westonhaugh was a wise man, a very wise man," he droned. "He foresaw what your pleasure would be, and left a letter for you. But before I read it, before I invite you to the board he ordered to be spread for you in honor of this happy occasion, there is one appeal he bade me make to those I should find assembled here. As you know, he was not personally acquainted with all the children and grandchildren of his many brothers and sisters. Salmon's sons, for instance, were perfect strangers to him, and all those boys and girls of the Evans' branch have never been long enough this side of the mountains for him to know their names, much less their temper or their lives. Yet his heirs —or such was his wish, his great wish—must be honest men, righteous in their dealings, and of stainless lives. If therefore, any one among you feels that for reasons he need not state, he has no right to accept his share of Anthony Westonhaugh's bounty, then

that person is requested to withdraw before this letter to his heirs is read."

Withdraw? Was the man a fool? *Withdraw?*—these cormorants! these suckers of blood! these harpies and vultures! I laughed as I imagined sneaking Hector, malicious Luke or brutal John responding to this naïve appeal, and then found myself wondering why no echo of my mirth came from the men themselves. They must have seen much more plainly than I did the ludicrousness of their weak old kinsman's demand; yet Luke was still; Hector was still; and even John, and the three or four others I have mentioned gave forth no audible token of disdain or surprise. I was asking myself what sentiment of awe or fear restrained these selfish souls, when I became conscious of a movement within, which presently resolved itself into a departing footstep.

Some conscience there had been awakened. Some one was crossing the floor toward the door. Who? I waited in anxious expectancy for the word which was to enlighten me.

Happily it came soon, and from the old lawyer's lips.

"You do not feel yourself worthy?" he queried, in tones I had not heard from him before. "Why? What have you done that you should forego an inheritance to which these others feel themselves honestly entitled?"

The voice which answered gave both my mind and heart a shock. It was *she* who had risen at this call. *She*, the only true-faced person there!

Anxiously I listened for her reply. Alas! it was one of action rather than speech. As I afterward heard, she simply opened her long cloak and showed a little infant slumbering in her arms.

"This is my reason," said she. "I have sinned in the eyes of the world, therefore I can not take my share of Uncle Anthony's money. I did not know he exacted an unblemished record from those he expected to enrich, or I would not have come."

The sob which followed these last words showed at what a cost she thus renounced a

fortune of which she, of all present, perhaps, stood in the greatest need; but there was no lingering in her step; and to me, who understood her fault only through the faint sound of infantile wailing which accompanied her departure, there was a nobility in her action which raised her in an instant to an almost ideal height of unselfish virtue.

Perhaps they felt this, too. Perhaps even these hardened men and the more than hardened woman whose presence was in itself a blight, recognized heroism when they saw it; for when the lawyer, with a certain obvious reluctance, laid his hand on the bolts of the door with the remark: "This is not my work, you know; I am but following out instructions very minutely given me," the smothered growls and grunts which rose in reply lacked the venom which had been infused into all their previous comments.

"I think our friends out there are far enough withdrawn, by this time, for us to hazard the opening of the door," the lawyer now remarked. "Madam, I hope you will

speedily find your way to some comfortable shelter."

Then the door opened, and after a moment, closed again in a silence which at least was respectful. Yet I warrant there was not a soul remaining who had not already figured in his mind to what extent his own fortune had been increased by the failure of one of their number to inherit.

As for me, my whole interest in the affair was at an end, and I was only anxious to find my way to where this desolate woman faced the mist with her unfed baby in her arms.

III

A LIFE DRAMA

But to reach this wanderer, it was first necessary for me to escape from the house. This proved simple enough. The up-stairs room toward which I rushed had a window overlooking one of the many lean-tos already mentioned. This window was fastened, but I had no difficulty in unlocking it or in finding my way to the ground from the top of the lean-to. But once again on terra-firma, I discovered that the mist was now so thick that it had all the effect of a fog at sea. It was icy cold as well, and clung about me so that I presently began to shudder most violently, and, strong man though I was, wish myself back in the little attic bedroom from which I had climbed in search of one in more unhappy case than myself.

But these feelings did not cause me to re-

turn. If I found the night cold, she must find it bitter. If desolation oppressed my naturally hopeful spirit, must it not be more overwhelming yet to one whose memories were sad and whose future was doubtful? And the child! What infant could live in an air like this! Edging away from the house, I called out her name, but no answer came back. The persons whom we had heard flitting in restless longing about the house a few moments before had left in rage and she, possibly, with them. Yet I could not imagine her joining herself to people of their stamp. There had been a solitariness in her aspect which seemed to forbid any such companionship. Whatever her story, at least she had nothing in common with the two ill-favored persons whose faces I had seen looking in at the casement. No; I should find her alone, but where? Certainly the ring of mist, surrounding me at that moment, offered me little prospect of finding her anywhere, either easily or soon.

Again I raised my voice, and again I

failed to meet with response. Then, fearing to leave the house lest I should be quite lost amid the fences and brush lying between it and the road, I began to feel my way along the walls, calling softly now, instead of loudly, so anxious was I not to miss any chance of carrying comfort, if not succor, to the woman I was seeking. But the night gave back no sound, and when I came to the open door of a shed, I welcomed the refuge it offered and stepped in. I was, of course, confronted by darkness,—a different darkness from that without, blanket-like and impenetrable. But when after a moment of intense listening I heard a soft sound as of weariful breathing, I was seized anew by hope, and, feeling in my pocket for my match-box, I made a light and looked around.

My intuitions had not deceived me; she was there. Sitting on the floor with her cheek pressed against the wall, she revealed to my eager scrutiny only the outlines of her pure, pale profile; but in those outlines and on those pure, pale features, I saw such an

abandonment of hope, mingled with such quiet endurance, that my whole soul melted before it, and it was with difficulty I managed to say:

"Pardon! I do not wish to intrude; but I am shut out of the house also; and the night is raw and cold. Can I do nothing for your comfort or for—for the child's?"

She turned toward me and I saw a tremulous gleam of pleasure disturb the somber stillness of her face; then the match went out in my hand, and we were again in complete darkness. But the little wail, which at the same instant rose from between her arms, filled up the pause, as her sweet "Hush!" filled my heart.

"I am used to the cold," came in another moment from the place where she crouched. "It is the child—she is hungry; and I—I walked here—feeling, hoping that, as my father's heir, I might partake in some slight measure of Uncle Anthony's money. Though my father cast me out before he died, and I have neither home nor money, I do not com-

plain. I forfeited all when—" another wail, another gentle "hush!"—then silence.

I lit another match. "Look in my face!" I prayed. "I am a stranger, and you would be showing only proper prudence not to trust me. But I overheard your words when you withdrew from the room where your fortune lay; and I honor you, madam. If food can be got for your little one, I will get it."

I caught sight of the convulsive clasp with which she drew to her breast the tiny bundle she held, then darkness fell again.

"A little bread," she entreated; "a little milk—ah, baby, baby, hush!"

"But where can I get it?" I cried. "They are at table inside. I hear them shouting over their good cheer. But perhaps there are neighbors near by; do you know?"

"There are no neighbors," she replied. "What is got must be got here. I know a way to the kitchen; I used to visit Uncle Anthony when a little child; if you have the courage—"

I laughed. This token of confidence

seemed to reassure her. I heard her move; possibly she stood up.

"In the further corner of this shed," said she, "there used to be a trap, connecting this floor with an underground passage-way. A ladder stood against the trap, and the small cellar at the foot communicated by means of an iron-bound door with the large one under the house. Eighteen years ago the wood of that door was old; now it should be rotten. If you have the strength—"

"I will make the effort and see," said I. "But when I am in the cellar, what then?"

"Follow the wall to the right; you will come to a stone staircase. As this staircase has no railing, be careful in ascending it. At the top you will find a door; it leads into a pantry adjoining the kitchen. Some one will be in that pantry. Some one will give you a bite for the child; and when she is quieted and the sun has risen, I will go away. It is my duty to do so. My uncle was always upright, if cold. He was perfectly justified in exacting rectitude in his heirs."

I might have rejoined by asking if she detected rectitude in the faces of the greedy throng she had left behind her with the guardian of this estate; but I did not. I was too intent upon following out her directions. Lighting another match, I sought the trap. Alas! it was burdened with a pile of sticks and rubbish which looked as if they had lain there for years. As these had to be removed in total darkness, it took me some time. But once this debris had been scattered and thrown aside, I had no difficulty in finding the trap and, as the ladder was still there, I was soon on the cellar-bottom. When, by the reassuring shout I gave, she knew that I had advanced thus far, she spoke, and her voice had a soft and thrilling sound.

"Do not forget your own needs," she said. "We two are not so hungry that we can not wait for you to take a mouthful. I will sing to the baby. Good-by."

These ten minutes we had spent together had made us friends. The warmth, the strength which this discovery brought, gave

to my arm a force that made that old oak door go down before me in three vigorous pushes.

Had the eight fortunate ones above not been indulging in a noisy celebration of their good luck, they must have heard the clatter of this door when it fell. But good eating, good drink, and the prospect of an immediate fortune far beyond their wildest dreams, made all ears deaf; and no pause occurred in the shouts of laughter and the hum of good-fellowship which sifted down between the beams supporting the house above my head. Consequently little or no courage was required for the completion of my adventure; and before long I came upon the staircase and the door leading from its top into the pantry. The next minute I was in front of that door.

But here a surprise awaited me. The noise which had hitherto been loud now became deafening, and I realized that, contrary to Eunice Westonhaugh's expectation, the supper had been spread in the kitchen and that I was likely to run amuck of the whole des-

picable crowd in any effort I might make to get a bite for the famished baby.

I therefore naturally hesitated to push open the door, fearing to draw attention to myself; and when I did succeed in lifting the latch and making a small crack, I was so astonished by the sudden lull in the general babble, that I drew hastily back and was for descending the stairs in sudden retreat.

But I was prevented from carrying out this cowardly impulse, by catching the sound of the lawyer's voice, addressing the assembled guests.

"You have eaten and you have drunk," he was saying; "you are therefore ready for the final toast. Brothers, nephews—heirs all of Anthony Westonhaugh, I rise to propose the name of your generous benefactor, who, if spirits walk this earth, must certainly be with us to-night."

A grumble from more than one throat and an uneasy hitch from such shoulders as I could see through my narrow vantage-hole testified to the rather doubtful pleasure with

which this suggestion was received. But the lawyer's tones lost none of their animation as he went on to say:

"The bottle, from which your glasses are to be replenished for this final draft, he has himself provided. So anxious was he that it should be of the very best and altogether worthy of the occasion it is to celebrate, that he gave into my charge, almost with his dying breath, this key, telling me that it would unlock a cupboard here in which he had placed a bottle of wine of the very rarest vintage. This is the key, and yonder, if I do not mistake, is the cupboard."

They had already quaffed a dozen toasts. Perhaps this was why they accepted this proposition in a sort of panting silence, which remained unbroken while the lawyer crossed the floor, unlocked the cupboard and brought out before them a bottle which he held up before their eyes with a simulated glee almost saturnine.

"Isn't that a bottle to make your eyes dance? The very cobwebs on it are eloquent.

And see! look at this label. Tokay, friends, real Tokay! How many of you ever had the opportunity of drinking real Tokay before?"

A long deep sigh from a half-dozen throats in which some strong but hitherto repressed passion, totally incomprehensible to me, found sudden vent, rose in one simultaneous sound from about that table, and I heard one jocular voice sing out:

"Pass it around, Smead. I'll drink to Uncle Anthony out of that bottle till there isn't a drop left to tell what was in it!"

But the lawyer was in no hurry.

"You have forgotten the letter, for the hearing of which you are called together. Mr. Anthony Westonhaugh left behind him a letter. The time is now come for reading it."

As I heard these words and realized that the final toast was to be delayed and that some few moments must yet elapse before the room would be cleared and an opportunity given me for obtaining what I needed for the famishing mother and child, I felt such impatience

with the fact and so much anxiety as to the condition of those I had left behind me that I questioned whether it would not be better for me to return to them empty-handed than to leave them so long without the comfort of my presence, when the fascination of the scene again seized me and I found myself lingering to mark its conclusion with an avidity which can only be explained by my sudden and intense consciousness of what it all might mean to her whose witness I had thus inadvertently become.

The careful lawyer began by quoting the injunction with which this letter had been put in his hands. "'When they are warm with food and wine, but not too warm,'— thus his adjuration ran, 'then let them hear my first and only words to them.' I know you are eager for these words. Folk so honest, so convinced of their own purity and uprightness that they can stand unmoved while the youngest and most helpless among them withdraws her claim to wealth and independence rather than share an unmerited bounty, such folk, I

say, must be eager, must be anxious to know why they have been made the legatees of so great a fortune, under the easy conditions and amid such slight restrictions as have been imposed upon them by their munificent kinsman."

"I had rather go on drinking toasts," babbled one thick voice.

"I had rather finish my figuring," growled another, in whose grating tones no echo remained of Hector Westonhaugh's formerly honeyed voice. "I am making out a list of stock—"

"Blast your stock! that is, if you mean horses and cows!" screamed a third. "I'm going in for city life. With less money than we have got, Andreas Amsberger got to be alderman—"

"Alderman!" sneered the whole pack; and the tumult became general. "If more of us had been sick," called out one; "or if Uncle Luke, say, had tripped into the ditch instead of on the edge of it, the fellows who came safe through might have had anything they

wanted, even to the governorship of the state or—or—"

"Silence!" came in commanding tones from the lawyer, who had begun to let his disgust appear, perhaps because he held under his thumb the bottle upon which all eyes were now lovingly centered; so lovingly, indeed, that I ventured to increase, in the smallest perceptible degree, the crack by means of which I was myself an interested, if unseen, participator in this scene.

A sight of Smead, and a partial glimpse of old Luke's covetous profile, rewarded this small act of daring on my part. The lawyer was standing; all the rest were sitting. Perhaps he alone retained sufficient steadiness to stand; for I observed by the control he exercised over this herd of self-seekers, that he alone had not touched the cup which had so freely gone about among the others. The woman was hidden from me, but the change in her voice, when by any chance I heard it, convinced me that she had not disdained the toasts drunk by her brothers and nephews.

"Silence!" the lawyer reiterated, "or I will smash this bottle on the hearth." He raised it in one threatening hand and every man there seemed to tremble, while old Luke put out his long fingers with an entreaty that ill became them. "You want to hear the letter?" old Smead called out. "I thought so."

Putting the bottle down again, but still keeping one hand upon it, he drew a folded paper from his breast. "This," said he, "contains the final injunctions of Anthony Westonhaugh. You will listen, all of you; listen till I am done; or I will not only smash this bottle before your eyes, but I will keep for ever buried in my breast the whereabouts of certain drafts and bonds in which, as his heirs, you possess the greatest interest. Nobody but myself knows where these papers can be found."

Whether this was so, or whether the threat was an empty one thrown out by this subtile old schemer for the purpose of safeguarding his life from their possible hate and impatience, it answered his end with these semi-

intoxicated men, and secured him the silence he demanded. Breaking open the seal of the envelope he held, he showed them the folded sheet which it contained, with the remark:

"I have had nothing to do with the writing of this letter. It is in Mr. Westonhaugh's own hand, and he was not even so good as to communicate to me the nature of its contents. I was bidden to read it to such as should be here assembled under the provisos mentioned in his will; and as you are now in a condition to listen, I will proceed with my task as required."

This was my time for leaving, but a certain brooding terror, latent in the air, held me chained to the spot, listening with my ears, but receiving the full sense of what was read from the expression of old Luke's face, which was probably more plainly visible to me than to those who sat beside him. For, being bent almost into a bow, as I have said, his forehead came within an inch of touching his plate, and one had to look under his arms, as I did, to catch the workings of his evil

mouth, as old Smead gave forth, in his professional sing-song, the following words from his departed client:

"Brothers, nephews and heirs! Though the earth has lain upon my breast a month, I am with you here to-night."

A snort from old Luke's snarling lips; and a stir—not a comfortable one—in the jostling crowd, whose shaking arms and clawing hands I could see projecting here and there over the board.

"My presence at this feast—a presence which, if unseen, can not be unfelt, may bring you more pain than pleasure. But if so, it matters little. You are my natural heirs and I have left you my money; why, when so little love has characterized our intercourse, must be evident to such of my brothers as can recall their youth and the promise our father exacted from us on the day we set foot in this new land.

"There were nine of us in those days: Luke, Salmon, Barbara, Hector, Eustace, Janet, Hudson, William and myself; and all save

one were promising, in appearance at least. But our father knew his offspring, and when we stood, an alien and miserable band in front of Castle Garden, at the foot of the great city whose immensity struck terror to our hearts, he drew all our hands together and made us swear by the soul of our mother, whose body we had left in the sea, that we would keep the bond of brotherhood intact, and share with mutual confidence whatever good fortune this untried country might hold in store for us. You were strong and your voices rang out loudly. Mine was faint, for I was weak —so weak that my hand had to be held in place by my sister Barbara. But my oath has never lost its hold upon my heart, while yours—answer how you have kept it, Luke; or you, Janet; or you Hector, of the smooth tongue and vicious heart; or you, or you, who, from one stock, recognize but one law: the law of cold-blooded selfishness which seeks its own in face of all oaths and at the cost of another man's heart-break.

"This I say to such as know my story. But

lest there be one amongst you who has not heard from parent or uncle the true tale of him who has brought you all under one roof to-night, I will repeat it here in words, that no man may fail to understand why I remembered my oath through life and beyond death, yet stand above you an accusing spirit while you quaff me toasts and count the gains my justice divides among you.

"I, as you all remember, was the weak one —the ne'er-do-weel. When all of you were grown and had homes of your own, I still remained under the family roof-tree, fed by our father's bounty and looking to our father's justice for that share of his savings which he had promised to all alike. When he died it came to me as it came to you; but I had married before that day; married, not, like the rest of you, for what a wife could bring, but for sentiment and true passion. This, in my case, meant a loving wife, but a frail one; and while we lived a little while on the patrimony left us, it was far too small to support us long without some aid from our

own hands; and our hands were feeble and could not work. And so we fell into debt for rent and, ere long, for the commonest necessities of life. In vain I struggled to redeem myself; the time of my prosperity had not come and I only sank deeper and deeper into debt and finally into indigence. A baby came. Our landlord was kind and allowed us to stay for two weeks under the roof for whose protection we could not pay; but at the end of that time we were asked to leave; and I found myself on the road with a dying wife, a wailing infant, no money in my purse and no power in my arm to earn any. Then when heart and hope were both failing, I recalled that ancient oath and the six prosperous homes scattered up and down the very highway on which I stood. I could not leave my wife; the fever was in her veins and she could not bear me out of her sight; so I put her on a horse, which a kind old neighbor was willing to lend me, and holding her up with one hand, guided the horse with the other, to the home of my brother Luke. He was a straight

enough fellow in those days—physically, I mean—and he looked able and strong that morning, as he stood in the open doorway of his house, gazing down at us as we halted before him in the roadway. But his temper had grown greedy with the accumulation of a few dollars, and he shook his head as he closed his door, saying he remembered no oath and that spenders must expect to be beggars.

"Struck to the heart by a rebuff which meant prolongation of the suffering I saw in my dear wife's eyes, I stretched up and kissed her where she sat half-fainting on the horse; then I moved on. I came to Barbara's home next. She had been a little mother to me once; that is, she had fed and dressed me, and doled out blows and caresses, and taught me to read and sing. But Barbara in her father's home and without fortune was not the Barbara I saw on the threshold of the little cottage she called her own. She heard my story; looked in the face of my wife and turned her back. She had no place for idle folk in her little house; if we would work

she would feed us; but we must earn our supper or go hungry to bed. I felt the trembling of my wife's frame where she leaned against my arm, and kissing her again, led her on to Salmon's. Luke, Hector, Janet, have you heard him tell of that vision at his gateway, twenty-five years ago? He is not amongst you. For twelve years he has lain beside our father in the churchyard, but his sons may be here, for they were ever alert when gold was in sight or a full glass to be drained. Ask *them*, ask John, whom I saw skulking behind his cousins at the garden fence that day, what it was they saw as I drew rein under the great tree which shadowed their father's doorstep.

"The sunshine had been pitiless that morning, and the head, for whose rest in some loving shelter I would have bartered soul and body, had fallen sidewise till it lay on my arm. Pressed to her breast was our infant, whose little wail struck in pitifully as Salmon called out: 'What's to do here to-day!' Do you remember it, lads? or how you all

laughed, little and great, when I asked for a few weeks' stay under my brother's roof till we could all get well and go about our tasks again? *I* remember. I, who am writing these words from the very mouth of the tomb, *I* remember; but I did not curse you. I only rode on to the next. The way ran uphill now; and the sun which, since our last stop, had been under a cloud, came out and blistered my wife's cheeks, already burning red with fever. But I pressed my lips upon them, and led her on. With each rebuff I gave her a kiss; and her smile, as her head pressed harder and harder upon my arm now exerting all its strength to support her, grew almost divine. But it vanished at my nephew Lemuel's.

"He was shearing sheep, and could give no time to company; and when, late in the day, I drew rein at Janet's, and she said she was going to have a dance and could not look after sick folk, the pallid lips failed to return my despairing embrace; and in the terror which this brought me I went down, in the

gathering twilight, into the deep valley where William raised his sheep and reckoned, day by day, the increase among his pigs. Oh, the chill of that descent! Oh, the gloom of the gathering shadows! As we neared the bottom and I heard a far-off voice shout out a hoarse command, some instinct made me reach up for the last time and bestow that faithful kiss, which was at once her consolation and my prayer. My lips were cold with the terror of my soul, but they were not so cold as the cheek they touched, and, shrieking in my misery and need, I fell before William where he halted by the horse-trough and— He was always a hard man, was William, and it was a shock to him, no doubt, to see us standing in our anguish and necessity before him; but he raised the whip in his hand and, when it fell, my arm fell with it and she slipped from my grasp to the ground, and lay in a heap in the roadway.

"He was ashamed next minute and pointed to the house near-by. But I did not carry her in, and she died in the roadway. Do

you remember it, Luke? Do you remember it, Lemuel?

"But it is not of this I complain at this hour, nor is it for this I ask you to drink the toast I have prepared for you."

The looks, the writhings of old Luke and such others as I could now see through the widening crack my hands unconsciously made in the doorway, told me that the rack was at work in this room so lately given up to revelry. Yet the mutterings, which from time to time came to my ears from one sullen lip or another, did not rise into frightened imprecation or even into any assertion of sorrow or contrition. It seemed as if some suspense, common to all, held them speechless if not dumbly apprehensive; and while the lawyer said nothing in recognition of this, he could not have been quite blind to it, for he bestowed one curious glance around the table before he proceeded with old Anthony's words.

Those words had now become short, sharp, and accusatory.

"My child lived; and what remained to me of human passion and longing centered in his frail existence. I managed to earn enough for his eating and housing, and in time I was almost happy again. This was while our existence was a struggle; but when, with the discovery of latent powers in my own mind, I began to find my place in the world and to earn money, then your sudden interest in my boy taught me a new lesson in human selfishness; but not, as yet, new fears. My nature was not one to grasp ideas of evil, and the remembrance of that oath still remained to make me lenient toward you.

"I let him see you; not much, not often, but yet often enough for him to realize that he had uncles and cousins, or, if you like it better, kindred. And how did you repay this confidence on my part? What hand had ye in the removal of this small barrier to the fortune my own poor health warranted you in looking upon, even in those early days, as your own? To others' eyes it may appear, none; to mine, ye are one and all his murder-

ers, as certainly as all of you were the murderers of the good physician hastening to his aid. For his illness was not a mortal one. He would have been saved if the doctor had reached him; but a precipice swallowed that good Samaritan, and only I, of all who looked upon the footprints which harrowed up the road at this dangerous point, knew whose shoes would fit those marks. God's providence, it was called, and I let it pass for such; but it was a providence which cost me my boy and made *you* my heirs."

Silence as sullen in character as the men who found themselves thus openly impeached had, for some minutes now, replaced the muttered complaints which had accompanied the first portion of this denunciatory letter. As the lawyer stopped to cast them another of those strange looks, a gleam from old Luke's sidewise eyes startled the man next him, who, shrugging a shoulder, passed the underhanded look on, till it had circled the board and stopped with the man sitting opposite the crooked sinner who had started it.

I began to have a wholesome dread of them all and was astonished to see the lawyer drop his hand from the bottle, which to some degree offered itself as a possible weapon. But he knew his audience better than I did. Though the bottle was now free for any man's taking, not a hand trembled toward it, nor was a single glass held out.

The lawyer, with an evil smile, went on with his relentless client's story.

"Ye had killed my wife; ye had killed my son; but this was not enough. Being lonesome in my great house, which was as much too large for me as my fortune was, I had taken a child to replace the boy I had lost. Remembering the cold blood running in the veins of those nearest me, I chose a boy from alien stock and, for a while, knew contentment again. But, as he developed and my affections strengthened, the possibility of all my money going his way roused my brothers and sisters from the complacency they had enjoyed since their road to fortune had been secured by my son's death, and one day—

can you recall it, Hudson? can you recall it, Lemuel?—the boy was brought in from the mill and laid at my feet, dead! He had stumbled amongst the great belts, but whose was the voice which had startled him with a sudden 'Halloo!' Can you say, Luke? Can you say, John? I can say in whose ear it was whispered that three, if not more of you, were seen moving among the machinery that fatal morning.

"Again, God's providence was said to have visited my house; and again *ye* were my heirs."

"Stop there!" broke in the harsh voice of Luke, who was gradually growing livid under his long gray locks.

"Lies! lies!" shrieked Hector, gathering courage from his brother.

"Cut it all and give us the drink!" snarled one of the younger men, who was less under the effect of liquor than the rest.

But a trembling voice muttered "Hush!" and the lawyer, whose eye had grown steely under these comments, took advantage of the

sudden silence which had followed this last objurgation and went steadily on.

"Some men would have made a will and denounced you. I made a will, but did not denounce you. *I* am no breaker of oaths. More than this, I learned a new trick. I, who hated all subtlety and looked upon craft as the favorite weapon of the devil, learned to smile with my lips while my heart was burning with hatred. Perhaps this was why you all began to smile too, and joke me about certain losses I had sustained, by which you meant the gains which had come to me. That these gains were many times greater than you realized added to the sting of this good fellowship, but I held my peace; and you began to have confidence in a good-nature which nothing could shake. You even gave me a supper."

A supper!

What was there in these words to cause every man there to stop in whatever movement he was making and stare, with wide-open eyes, intently at the reader. He had spoken

quietly; he had not even looked up, but the silence which, for some minutes back, had begun to reign over that tumultuous gathering, now became breathless, and the seams in Hector's cheeks deepened to a bluish criss-cross.

"*You remember that supper?*"

As the words rang out again, I threw wide the door; I might have stalked openly into their circle; not a man there would have noticed me.

"It was a memorable occasion," the lawyer read on with stoical impassiveness. "There was not a brother lacking. Luke and Hudson and William and Hector and Eustace's boys, as well as Eustace himself; Janet too, and Salmon's Lemuel, and Barbara's son, who, even if his mother had gone the way of all flesh, had so trained her black brood in the love of the things of this world that I scarcely missed her when I looked about among you all for the eight sturdy brothers and sisters who had joined in one clasp and one oath, under the eye of the true-hearted immigrant, our father. What I did miss was

one true eye lifted to my glance; but I did not show that I missed it; and so our peace was made and we separated, you to wait for your inheritance, and I for the death which was to secure it to you. For, when the cup passed round that night, you each dropped into it a tear of repentance, and tears make bitter drinking. I sickened as I quaffed and was never myself again, as you know. Do you understand me, you cruel, crafty ones?"

Did they not! Heads quaking, throats gasping, teeth chattering—no longer sitting—all risen, all looking with wild eyes for the door—was it not apparent that they understood and only waited for one more word to break away and flee the accursed house?

But that word lingered. Old Smead had now grown pale himself and read with difficulty the lines which were to end this frightful scene. As I saw the red gleam of terror shine out from his small eyes, I wondered if he had been but the blind tool of his implacable client and was as ignorant as those

before him of what was to follow this heavy arraignment. The dread with which he finally proceeded was too marked for me to doubt the truth of this surmise. This is what he found himself forced to read:

"There was a bottle reserved for me. It had a green label on it,—"

A shriek from every one there and a hurried look up and down at the bottles standing on the table.

"A green label," the lawyer repeated, "and it made a goodly appearance as it was set down before me. But you had no liking for wine with a green label on the bottle. One by one you refused it, and when I rose to quaff my final glass alone, every eye before me fell and did not lift again until the glass was drained. I did not notice this then, but I see it all now, just as I hear again the excuses you gave for not filling your glasses as the bottle went round. One had drunk enough; one suffered from qualms brought on by an unaccustomed indulgence in oysters; one felt that wine good enough for me was

too good for him, and so on and so on. Not one to show frank eyes and drink with me as I was ready to drink with him! Why? Because one and all of you knew what was in that cup, and would not risk an inheritance so nearly within your grasp."

"Lies! lies!" again shrieked the raucous voice of Luke, smothered by terror; while oaths, shouts, imprecations, rang out in horrid tumult from one end of the table to the other, till the lawyer's face, over which a startling change was rapidly passing, drew the whole crowd forward again in awful fascination, till they clung, speechless, arm in arm, shoulder propping shoulder, while he gasped out in dismay equal to their own, these last fatal words:

"That was at your board, my brothers; now you are at mine. You have eaten my viands, drunk of my cup; and now, through the mouth of the one man who has been true to me because therein lies his advantage, I offer you a final glass. Will you drink it? I drank yours. By that old-time oath which

binds us to share each other's fortune, I ask you to share this cup with me. *You will not?*"

"No, no, no!" shouted one after another.

"Then," the inexorable voice went on, a voice which to these miserable souls was no longer that of the lawyer, but an issue from the grave they had themselves dug for Anthony Westonhaugh, "know that your abstinence comes too late; that you have already drunk the toast destined to end your lives. The bottle which you must have missed from that board of yours has been offered you again. A label is easily changed and—Luke, John, Hector, I know you all so well—that bottle has been greedily emptied by you; and while I, who sipped sparingly, lived three weeks, you, who have drunk deep, *have not three hours before you, possibly not three minutes.*"

O, the wail of those lost souls as this last sentence issued in a final pant of horror from the lawyer's quaking lips! Shrieks—howls—prayers for mercy—groans to make the

hair rise—and curses, at sound of which I shut my ears in horror, only to open them again in dread as, with one simultaneous impulse, they flung themselves upon the lawyer who, foreseeing this rush, had backed up against the wall.

He tried to stem the tide.

"I knew nothing of the poisoning," he protested. "That was not my reason for declining the drink. I wished to preserve my senses—to carry out my client's wishes. As God lives, I did not know he meant to carry his revenge so far. Mercy! Mer—"

But the hands which clutched him were the hands of murderers, and the lawyer's puny figure could not stand up against the avalanche of human terror, relentless fury and mad vengeance which now rolled in upon it. As I bounded to his relief he turned his ghastly face upon me. But the way between us was blocked, and I was preparing myself to see him sink before my eyes, when an unearthly shriek rose from behind us, and every living soul in that mass

of struggling humanity paused, set and staring, with stiffened limbs and eyes fixed, not on him, not on me, but on one of their own number, the only woman amongst them, Janet Clapsaddle, who, with clutching hands clawing her breast, was reeling in solitary agony in her place beside the board. As they looked she fell, and lay with upturned face and staring eyes, in whose glassy depths the ill-fated ones who watched her could see mirrored their own impending doom.

It was an awful moment. A groan, in which was concentrated the despair of seven miserable souls, rose from that petrified band; then, man by man, they separated and fell back, showing on each weak or wicked face the particular passion which had driven them into crime and made them the victims of this wholesale revenge. There had been some sort of bond between them till the vision of death rose before each shrinking soul. Shoulder to shoulder in crime, they fell apart as their doom approached; and rushing, shrieking, each man for himself, they one and all sought

to escape by doors, windows or any outlet which promised release from this fatal spot. One rushed by me—I do not know which one—and I felt as if a flame from hell had licked me, his breath was so hot and the moans he uttered so like the curses we imagine to blister the lips of the lost. None of them saw me; they did not even detect the sliding form of the lawyer crawling away before them to some place of egress of which they had no knowledge; and, convinced that in this scene of death I could play no part worthy of her who awaited me, I too rushed away and, groping my way back through the cellar, sought the side of her who still crouched in patient waiting against the dismal wall.

IV

THE FINAL SHOCK

Her baby had fallen asleep. I knew this by the faint, low sweetness of her croon; and, shuddering with the horrors I had witnessed, horrors which acquired a double force from the contrast presented by the peace of this quiet spot and the hallowing influence of the sleeping infant,—I threw myself down in the darkness at her feet, gasping out:

"Oh, thank God and your uncle's seeming harshness, that you have escaped the doom which has overtaken those others! You and your babe are still alive; while they—"

"What of them? What has happened to them? You are breathless, trembling; you have brought no bread—"

"No, no. Food in this house means death. Your relatives gave food and wine to your uncle at a supper; he, though now in his

grave, has returned the same to them. There was a bottle—"

I stopped, appalled. A shriek, muffled by distance but quivering with the same note of death I had heard before, had gone up again from the other side of the wall against which we were leaning.

"Oh!" she gasped; "and my father was at that supper! my father, who died last night cursing the day he was born! We are an accursed race. I have known it all my life; perhaps that was why I mistook passion for love; and my baby—O God, have mercy! God have mercy!"

The plaintiveness of that cry, the awesomeness of what I had seen—of what was going on at that moment almost within the reach of our arms—the darkness, the desolation of our two souls, affected me as I had never been affected in my whole life before. In the concentrated experience of the last two hours I seemed to live years under this woman's eyes; to know her as I did my own heart; to love her as I did my own soul. No growth of feeling

ever brought the ecstasy of that moment's inspiration. With no sense of doing anything strange, with no fear of being misunderstood, I reached out my hand and, touching hers where it lay clasped about her infant, I said:

"We are two poor wayfarers. A rough road loses half its difficulties when trodden by two. Shall we, then, fare on together—we and the little child?"

She gave a sob; there was sorrow, longing, grief, hope, in its thrilling low sound. As I recognized the latter emotion I drew her to my breast. The child did not separate us.

"We shall be happy," I murmured, and her sigh seemed to answer a delicious "Yes," when suddenly there came a shock to the partition against which we leaned and, starting from my clasp, she cried:

"Our duty is in there. Shall we think of ourselves or even of each other while these men, all relatives of mine, are dying on the other side of this wall?"

Seizing my hand, she dragged me to the

trap; but here I took the lead, and helped her down the ladder. When I had her safely on the floor at the foot, she passed in front of me again; but once up the steps and in front of the kitchen door, I thrust her behind me, for one glance into the room beyond had convinced me it was no place for her.

But she would not be held back. She crowded forward beside me, and together we looked upon the wreck within. It was a never-to-be-forgotten scene. The demon that was in those men had driven them to demolish furniture, dishes, everything. In one heap lay what, an hour before, had been an inviting board surrounded by rollicking and greedy guests. But it was not upon this overthrow we stopped to look. It was upon something that mingled with it, dominated it and made of this chaos only a setting to awful death. Janet's face, in all its natural hideousness and depravity, looked up from the floor beside this heap; and farther on, the twisted figure of him they called Hector, with some-

thing more than the seams of greedy longing round his wide, staring eyes and icy temples. Two in this room! and on the threshold of the one beyond a moaning third, who sank into eternal silence as we approached; and before the fireplace in the great room, a horrible crescent that had once been aged Luke, upon whom we had no sooner turned our backs than we caught glimpses here and there of other prostrate forms which moved once under our eyes and then moved no more.

One only still stood upright, and he was the man whose obtrusive figure and sordid expression had so revolted me in the beginning. There was no color now in his flabby and heavily fallen cheeks. The eyes, in whose false sheen I had seen so much of evil, were glazed now, and his big and burly frame shook the door it pressed against. He was staring at a small slip of paper he held, and, from his anxious looks, appeared to miss something which neither of us had power to supply. It was a spectacle to make devils rejoice, and mortals fly aghast. But Eunice

had a spirit like an angel and drawing near him, she said:

"Is there anything I can do for you, Cousin John?"

He started, looked at her with the same blank gaze he had hitherto cast at the wall; then some words formed on his working lips and we heard:

"I can not reckon; I was never good at figures; but if Luke is gone, and William, and Hector, and Barbara's boy, and Janet,—*how much does that leave for me?*"

He was answered almost the moment he spoke; but it was by other tongues and in another world than this. As his body fell forward, I tore open the door before which he had been standing, and, lifting the almost fainting Eunice in my arms, I carried her out into the night. As I did so, I caught a final glimpse of the pictured face I had found it so hard to understand a couple of hours before. I understood it now.

A surprise awaited us as we turned toward the gate. The mist had lifted and a keen

but not unpleasant wind was driving from the north. Borne on it, we heard voices. The village had emptied itself, probably at the alarm given by the lawyer, and it was these good men and women whose approach we heard. As we had nothing to fear from them, we went forward to meet them. As we did so, three crouching figures rose from some bushes we passed and ran scurrying before us through the gateway. They were the late comers who had shown such despair at being shut out from this fatal house, and who probably did not yet know the doom they had escaped.

There were lanterns in the hands of some of the men who now approached. As we stopped before them, these lanterns were held up, and by the light they gave we saw, first, the lawyer's frightened face, then the visages of two men who seemed to be persons of some authority.

"What news?" faltered the lawyer, seeing by our faces that we knew the worst.

"Bad," I returned; "the poison had lost none of its virulence by being mixed so long with the wine."

"How many?" asked the man on his right anxiously.

"Eight," was my solemn reply.

"There were but eight," faltered the lawyer; "that means, then, all?"

"All," I repeated.

A murmur of horror rose, swelled, then died out in tumult as the crowd swept on past us.

For a moment we stood watching these people; saw them pause before the door we had left open behind us, then rush in, leaving a wail of terror on the shuddering midnight air. When all was quiet again, Eunice laid her hand upon my arm.

"Where shall we go?" she asked despairingly. "I do not know a house that will open to me."

The answer to her question came from other lips than mine.

"I do not know one that will *not*," spoke

up a voice behind our backs. "Your withdrawal from the circle of heirs did not take from you your rightful claim to an inheritance which, according to your uncle's will, could be forfeited only by a failure to arrive at the place of distribution within the hour set by the testator. As I see the matter now, this appeal to the honesty of the persons so collected was a test by which my unhappy client strove to save from the general fate such members of his miserable family as fully recognized their sin and were truly repentant."

It was Lawyer Smead. He had lingered behind the others to tell her this. She was, then, no outcast, but rich, very rich; how rich I dared not acknowledge to myself, lest a remembrance of the man who was the last to perish in that house of death should return to make this calculation hateful. It was a blow which struck deep, deeper than any either of us had sustained that night. As we came to realize it, I stepped slowly back, leaving her standing erect and tall in the mid-

dle of the roadway, with her baby in her arms. But not for long; soon she was close at my side murmuring softly:

"Two wayfarers still! Only, the road will be more difficult and the need of companionship greater. Shall we fare on together, you, I—and the little one?"

THE RUBY AND THE CALDRON

As there were two good men on duty that night, I did not see why I should remain at my desk, even though there was an unusual stir created in our small town by the grand ball given at The Evergreens.

But just as I was preparing to start for home, an imperative ring called me to the telephone and I heard:

"Halloo! Is this the police-station?"

"It is."

"Well, then, a detective is wanted at once at The Evergreens. He can not be too clever or too discreet. A valuable jewel has been lost, which must be found before the guests disperse for home. Large reward if the matter ends successfully and without too great publicity."

"May I ask who is speaking to me?"

"Mrs. Ashley."

It was the mistress of The Evergreens and giver of the ball.

"Madam, a man shall be sent at once. Where will you see him?"

"In the butler's pantry at the rear. Let him give his name as Jennings."

"Very good. Good-by."

"Good-by."

A pretty piece of work! Should I send Hendricks or should I send Hicks? Hendricks was clever and Hicks discreet, but neither united both qualifications in the measure demanded by the sensible and quietly-resolved woman with whom I had just been talking. What alternative remained? But one; I must go myself.

It was not late—not for a ball night, at least—and as half the town had been invited to the dance, the streets were alive with carriages. I was watching the blink of their lights through the fast falling snow when my attention was drawn to a fact which struck me as peculiar. These carriages were all coming my way instead of rolling in the

direction of The Evergreens. Had they been empty this would have needed no explanation, but, as far as I could see, most of them were full, and that, too, with loudly talking women and gesticulating men.

Something of a serious nature must have occurred at The Evergreens. Rapidly I paced on and soon found myself before the great gates.

A crowd of vehicles of all descriptions blocked the entrance. None seemed to be passing up the driveway; all stood clustered at the gates, and as I drew nearer I perceived many an anxious head thrust forth from their quickly opened doors and heard many an ejaculation of disappointment as the short interchange of words went on between the drivers of these various turnouts and a man drawn up in quiet resolution before the unexpectedly barred entrance.

Slipping round to this man's side, I listened to what he was saying. It was simple but very explicit.

"Mrs. Ashley asks everybody's pardon, but

the ball can't go on to-night. Something has happened which makes the reception of further guests impossible. To-morrow evening she will be happy to see you all. The dance is simply postponed."

This he had probably repeated forty times, and each time it had probably been received with the same mixture of doubt and curiosity which now held the lengthy procession in check.

Not wishing to attract attention, yet anxious to lose no time, I pressed up still nearer, and, bending toward him from the shadow cast by a convenient post, uttered the one word:

"Jennings."

Instantly he unlocked a small gate at his right. I passed in and, with professional *sang-froid*, proceeded to take my way to the house through the double row of evergreens bordering the semicircular approach.

As these trees stood very close together and were, besides, heavily laden with fresh-fallen snow, I failed to catch a glimpse of the build-

ing itself until I stood in front of it. Then I saw that it was brilliantly lighted and gave evidence here and there of some festivity; but the guests were too few for the effect to be very exhilarating and, passing around to the rear, I sought the special entrance to which I had been directed.

A heavy-browed porch, before which stood a caterer's wagon, led me to a door which had every appearance of being the one I sought. Pushing it open, I entered without ceremony, and speedily found myself in the midst of twenty or more colored waiters and chattering housemaids. To one of the former I addressed the question:

"Where is the butler's pantry? I am told that I shall find the lady of the house there."

"Your name?" was the curt demand.

"Jennings."

"Follow me."

I was taken through narrow passages and across one or two store-rooms to a small but well-lighted closet, where I was left, with the assurance that Mrs. Ashley would presently

join me. I had never seen this lady, but I had often heard her spoken of as a woman of superior character and admirable discretion.

She did not keep me waiting. In two minutes the door opened and this fine, well-poised woman was telling her story in the straightforward manner I so much admire and so seldom meet with.

The article lost was a large ruby of singular beauty and great value—the property of Mrs. Burton, the senator's wife, in whose honor this ball was given. It had not been lost in the house nor had it been originally missed that evening. Mrs. Burton and herself had attended the great foot-ball game in the afternoon, and it was on the college campus that Mrs. Burton had first dropped her invaluable jewel. But a reward of five hundred dollars having been at once offered to whoever should find and restore it, a great search had followed, which ended in its being picked up by one of the students and brought back as far as the great step leading up to

the front door, when it had again disappeared, and in a way to rouse conjecture of the strangest and most puzzling character.

The young man who had brought it thus far bore the name of John Deane, and was a member of the senior class. He had been the first to detect its sparkle in the grass, and those who were near enough to see his face at that happy moment say that it expressed the utmost satisfaction at his good luck.

"You see," said Mrs. Ashley, "he has a sweetheart, and five hundred dollars looks like a fortune to a young man just starting life. But he was weak enough to take this girl into his confidence; and on their way here—for both were invited to the ball — he went so far as to pull it out of his pocket and show it to her.

"They were admiring it together and vaunting its beauties to the young lady friend who had accompanied them, when their carriage turned into the driveway and they saw the lights of the house flashing before them.

Hastily restoring the jewel to the little bag he had made for it out of the finger-end of an old glove,—a bag in which he assured me he had been careful to keep it safely tied ever since picking it up on the college green,—he thrust it back into his pocket and prepared to help the ladies out. But just then a disturbance arose in front. A horse which had been driven up was rearing in a way that threatened to overturn the light buggy to which he was attached. As the occupants of this buggy were ladies, and seemed to have no control over the plunging beast, young Deane naturally sprang to the rescue. Bidding his own ladies alight and make for the porch, he hurriedly ran forward and, pausing in front of the maddened animal, waited for an opportunity to seize him by the rein. He says that as he stood there facing the beast with fixed eye and raised hand, he distinctly felt something strike or touch his breast. But the sensation conveyed no meaning to him in his excitement, and he did not think of it again till, the horse well in hand

and the two alarmed occupants of the buggy rescued, he turned to see where his own ladies were, and beheld them looking down at him from the midst of a circle of young people, drawn from the house by the screaming of the women. Instantly a thought of the treasure he carried recurred to his mind, and dropping the rein of the now quieted horse, he put his hand to his pocket. The jewel was gone. He declares that for a moment he felt as if he had been struck on the head by one of the hoofs of the frantic horse he had just handled. But immediately the importance of his loss and the necessity he felt for instant action restored him to himself, and shouting aloud, 'I have dropped Mrs. Burton's ruby!' begged every one to stand still while he made a search for it.

"This all occurred, as you must know, more than an hour and a half ago, consequently before many of my guests had arrived. My son, who was one of the few spectators gathered on the porch, tells me that there was only one other carriage behind the one in which

Mr. Deane had brought his ladies. Both of these had stopped short of the stepping-stone, and as the horse and buggy which had made all this trouble had by this time been driven to the stable, nothing stood in the way of his search but the rapidly accumulating snow which, if you remember, was falling very thick and fast at the time.

"My son, who had rushed in for his overcoat, came running down with offers to help him. So did some others. But, with an imploring gesture, he begged to be allowed to conduct the search alone, the ground being in such a state that the delicately-mounted jewel ran great risk of being trodden into the snow and thus injured or lost. They humored him for a moment, then, seeing that his efforts bade fair to be fruitless, my son insisted upon joining him, and the two looked the ground over, inch by inch, from the place where Mr. Deane had set foot to ground in alighting from his carriage to the exact spot where he had stood when he had finally seized hold of the horse. But no ruby. Then Har-

rison (that is my son's name) sent for a broom and went over the place again, sweeping aside the surface snow and examining carefully the ground beneath,—but with no better results than before. No ruby could be found. My son came to me panting. Mrs. Burton and myself stood awaiting him in a state of suspense. Guests and fête were alike forgotten. We had heard that the jewel had been found on the campus by one of the students and had been brought back as far as the step in front and then lost again in some unaccountable manner in the snow, and we hoped, nay expected from moment to moment, that it would be brought in.

"When Harrison entered, then, pale, disheveled and shaking his head, Mrs. Burton caught me by the hand, and I thought she would faint. For this jewel is of far greater value to her than its mere worth in money, though that is by no means small.

"It is a family jewel and was given to her by her husband under special circumstances. He prizes it even more than she does, and

he is not here to counsel or assist her in this extremity. Besides, she was wearing it in direct opposition to his expressed wishes. This I must tell you, to show how imperative it is for us to recover it; also to account for the large reward she is willing to pay. When he last looked at it he noticed that the fastening was a trifle slack and, though he handed the trinket back, he told her distinctly that she was not to wear it till it had been either to Tiffany's or Starr's. But she considered it safe enough, and put it on to please the boys, and lost it. Senator Burton is a hard man and,—in short, the jewel must be found. I give you just one hour in which to do it."

"But, madam—" I protested.

"I know," she put in, with a quick nod and a glance over her shoulder to see if the door was shut. "I have not finished my story. Hearing what Harrison had to say, I took action at once. I bade him call in the guests, whom curiosity or interest still detained on the porch, and seat them in a certain room

which I designated to him. Then, after telling him to send two men to the gates with orders to hold back all further carriages from entering, and two others to shovel up and cart away to the stable every particle of snow for ten feet each side of the front step, I asked to see Mr. Deane. But here my son whispered something into my ear, which it is my duty to repeat. It was to the effect that Mr. Deane believed that the jewel had been taken from him; that he insisted, in fact, that he had felt a hand touch his breast while he stood awaiting an opportunity to seize the horse. 'Very good,' said I, 'we'll remember that, too; but first see that my orders are carried out and that all approaches to the grounds are guarded and no one allowed to come in or go out without permission from me.'

"He left us, and I was turning to encourage Mrs. Burton when my attention was caught by the eager face of a little friend of mine, who, quite unknown to me, was sitting in one of the corners of the room. She was

studying my countenance in a sort of subdued anxiety, hardly natural in one so young, and I was about to call her to my side and question her when she made a sudden dive and vanished from the room. Some impulse made me follow her. She is a conscientious little thing, but timid as a hare, and though I saw she had something to say, it was with difficulty I could make her speak. Only after the most solemn assurances that her name should not be mentioned in the matter, would she give me the following bit of information, which you may possibly think throws another light upon the affair. It seems that she was looking out of one of the front windows when Mr. Deane's carriage drove up. She had been watching the antics of the horse attached to the buggy, but as soon as she saw Mr. Deane going to the assistance of those in danger, she let her eyes stray back to the ladies whom he had left behind him in the carriage.

"She did not know these ladies, but their looks and gestures interested her, and she watched them quite intently as they leaped

to the ground and made their way toward the porch. One went on quickly, and without pause, to the step, but the other,—the one who came last,—did not do this. She stopped a moment, perhaps to watch the horse in front, perhaps to draw her cloak more closely about her, and when she again moved on, it was with a start and a hurried glance at her feet, terminating in a quick turn and a sudden stooping to the ground. When she again stood upright, she had something in her hand which she thrust furtively into her breast."

"How was this lady dressed?" I inquired.

"In a white cloak, with an edging of fur. I took pains to learn that, too, and it was with some curiosity, I assure you, that I examined the few guests who had now been admitted to the room I had so carefully pointed out to my son. Two of them wore white cloaks, but one of these was Mrs. Dalrymple, and I did not give her or her cloak a second thought. The other was a tall, fine-looking girl, with

an air and bearing calculated to rouse admiration if she had not shown so very plainly that she was in a state of inner perturbation. Though she tried to look amiable and pleased, I saw that she had some care on her mind, which, had she been Mr. Deane's *fiancée*, would have needed no explanation; but as she was only Mr. Deane's *fiancée's* friend, its cause was not so apparent.

"The floor of the room, as I had happily remembered, was covered with crash, and as I lifted each garment off—I allowed no maid to assist me in this—I shook it well; ostensibly, because of the few flakes clinging to it, really to see if anything could be shaken out of it. Of course, I met with no success. I had not expected to, but it is my disposition to be thorough. These wraps I saw all hung in an adjoining closet, the door of which I locked,—here is the key,—after which I handed my guests over to my son who led them into the drawing-room where they joined the few others who had previously arrived, and went myself to telephone to *you*."

I bowed and asked where the young people were now.

"Still in the drawing-room. I have ordered the musicians to play, and consequently there is more or less dancing. But, of course, nothing can remove the wet blanket which has fallen over us all,—nothing but the finding of this jewel. Do you see your way to accomplishing this? We are, from this very moment, at your disposal; only I pray that you will make no more disturbance than is necessary, and, if possible, arouse no suspicions you can not back up by facts. I dread a scandal almost as much as I do sickness and death, and these young people—well, their lives are all before them, and neither Mrs. Burton nor myself would wish to throw the shadow of a false suspicion over the least of them."

I assured her that I sympathized with her scruples and would do my best to recover the ruby without inflicting undue annoyance upon the innocent. Then I inquired whether it was known that a detective had been called in.

She seemed to think it was suspected by some, if not by all. At which my way seemed a trifle complicated.

We were about to proceed when another thought struck me.

"Madam, you have not said whether the carriage itself was searched."

"I forgot. Yes, the carriage was thoroughly overhauled, and before the coachman left the box."

"Who did this overhauling?"

"My son. He would not trust any other hand than his own in a business of this kind."

"One more question, madam. Was any one seen to approach Mr. Deane on the carriage-drive prior to his assertion that the jewel was lost?"

"No. *And there were no tracks in the snow of any such person.* My son looked."

And I would look, or so I decided within myself, but I said nothing; and in silence we proceeded toward the drawing-room.

I had left my overcoat behind me, and always being well-dressed, I did not present so

bad an appearance. Still I was not in party attire and naturally could not pass for a guest if I had wanted to, which I did not. I felt that I must rely on insight in this case and on a certain power I had always possessed of reading faces. That the case called for just this species of intuition I was positive. Mrs. Burton's ruby was within a hundred yards of us at this very moment, probably within a hundred feet; but to lay hands on it and without scandal—well, that was a problem calculated to rouse the interest of even an old police-officer like myself.

A strain of music, desultory, however, and spiritless, like everything else about the place that night, greeted us as Mrs. Ashley opened the door leading directly into the large front hall.

Immediately a scene meant to be festive, but which was, in fact, desolate, burst upon us. The lights, the flowers and the brilliant appearance of such ladies as flitted into sight from the almost empty parlors, were all suggestive of the cheer suitable to a great occa-

sion; but in spite of this, the effect was altogether melancholy, for the hundreds who should have graced this scene, and for whom this illumination had been made and these festoons hung, had been turned away from the gates, and the few who felt they must remain, because their hostess showed no disposition to let them go, wore any but holiday faces, for all their forced smiles and pitiful attempts at nonchalance and gaiety.

I scrutinized these faces carefully. I detected nothing in them but annoyance at a situation which certainly was anything but pleasant.

Turning to Mrs. Ashley, I requested her to be kind enough to point out her son, adding that I should be glad to have a moment's conversation with him, also with Mr. Deane.

"Mr. Deane is in one of those small rooms over there. He is quite upset. Not even Mrs. Burton can comfort him. My son—Oh, there is Harrison!"

A tall, fine-looking young man was crossing the hall. Mrs. Ashley called him to her,

and in another moment we were standing together in one of the empty parlors.

I gave him my name and told him my business. Then I said:

"Your mother has allotted me an hour in which to find the valuable jewel which has just been lost on these premises." Here I smiled. "She evidently has great confidence in my ability. I must see that I do not disappoint her."

All this time I was examining his face. It was a handsome one, as I have said, but it had also a very candid expression; the eyes looked straight into mine, and, while showing anxiety, betrayed no deeper emotion than the occasion naturally called for.

"Have you any suggestions to offer? I understand that you were on the ground almost as soon as Mr. Deane discovered his loss."

His eyes changed a trifle but did not swerve. Of course he had been informed by his mother of the suspicious action of the young lady who had been a member of that

gentleman's party, and shrank, as any one in his position would, from the responsibilities entailed by this knowledge.

"No," said he. "We have done all we can. The next move must come from you."

"There is one that will settle the matter in a moment," I assured him, still with my eyes fixed scrutinizingly on his face,—"a universal search, not of places, but of persons. But it is a harsh measure."

"A most disagreeable one," he emphasized, flushing. "Such an indignity offered to guests would never be forgotten or forgiven."

"True, but if they offered to submit to this themselves?"

"They? How?"

"If *you*, the son of the house,—their host we may say,—should call them together and, for your own satisfaction, empty out your pockets in the sight of every one, don't you think that all the men, and possibly all the women too—" (here I let my voice fall suggestively) "would be glad to follow suit? It could be done in apparent joke."

He shook his head with a straightforward air, which raised him high in my estimation.

"That would call for little but effrontery on my part," said he; "but think what it would demand from these boys who came here for the sole purpose of enjoying themselves. I will not so much as mention the ladies."

"Yet one of the latter—"

"I know," he quietly acknowledged, growing restless for the first time.

I withdrew my eyes from his face. I had learned what I wished. Personally he did not shrink from search, therefore the jewel was not in his pockets. This left but two persons for suspicion to halt between. But I disclosed nothing of my thoughts; I merely asked pardon for a suggestion that, while pardonable in a man accustomed to handle crime with ungloved hands, could not fail to prove offensive to a gentleman like himself.

"We must move by means less open," I concluded. "It adds to our difficulties, but that can not be helped. I should now like a glimpse of Mr. Deane."

"Do you not wish to speak to him?"

"I should prefer a sight of his face first."

He led me across the hall and pointed through an open door. In the center of a small room containing a table and some chairs, I perceived a young man sitting, with fallen head and dejected air, staring at vacancy. By his side, with hand laid on his, knelt a young girl, striving in this gentle but speechless way to comfort him. It made a pathetic picture. I drew Ashley away.

"I am disposed to believe in that young man," said I. "If he still has the jewel, he would not try to carry off the situation in just this way. He really looks broken-hearted."

"Oh, he is dreadfully cut up. If you could have seen how frantically he searched for the stone, and the depression into which he fell when he realized that it was not to be found, you would not doubt him for an instant. What made you think he might still have the ruby?"

"Oh, we police officers think of everything. Then the fact that he insists that something

or some one touched his breast on the driveway strikes me as a trifle suspicious. Your mother says that no second person could have been there, or the snow would have given evidence of it."

"Yes; I looked expressly. Of course, the drive itself was full of hoof-marks and wheel-tracks, for several carriages had already passed over it. Then there were all of Deane's footsteps, but no other man's, as far as I could see."

"Yet he insists that he was touched or struck."

"Yes."

"With no one there to touch or strike him."

Mr. Ashley was silent.

"Let us step out and take a view of the place," I suggested. "I should prefer doing this to questioning the young man in his present state of mind." Then, as we turned to put on our coats, I asked with suitable precaution: "Do you suppose that he has the same secret suspicions as ourselves, and that it is to hide these he insists upon the jewel's hav-

ing been taken away from him at a point the ladies are known not to have approached?"

Young Ashley bent somewhat startled eyes on mine.

"Nothing has been said to him of what Miss Peters saw Miss Glover do. I could not bring myself to mention it. I have not even allowed myself to believe—"

Here a fierce gust, blowing in from the door he had just opened, cut short his words, and neither of us spoke again till we stood on the exact spot in the driveway where the episode we were endeavoring to understand had taken place.

"Oh," I cried as soon as I could look about me; "the mystery is explained. Look at that bush, or perhaps you call it a shrub. If the wind were blowing as freshly as it is now, and very probably it was, one of those slender branches might easily be switched against his breast, especially if he stood, as you say he did, close against this border."

"Well, I'm a fool. Only the other day I told the gardener that these branches would

need trimming in the spring, and yet I never so much as thought of them when Mr. Deane spoke of something striking his breast."

As we turned back I made this remark:

"With this explanation of the one doubtful point in his otherwise plausible account, we can credit his story as being in the main true, which," I calmly added, "places him above suspicion and narrows our inquiry down to *one*."

We had moved quickly and were now at the threshold of the door by which we had come out.

"Mr. Ashley," I continued, "I shall have to ask you to add to your former favors that of showing me the young lady in whom, from this moment on, we are especially interested. If you can manage to let me see her first without her seeing me, I shall be infinitely obliged to you."

"I do not know where she is. I shall have to search for her."

"I will wait by the hall door."

In a few minutes he returned to me.

"Come," said he, and led me into what I judged to be the library.

With a gesture toward one of the windows, he backed quickly out, leaving me to face the situation alone. I was rather glad of this. Glancing in the direction he had indicated, and perceiving the figure of a young lady standing with her back to me on the farther side of a flowing lace curtain, I took a few steps toward her, hoping that the movement would cause her to turn. But it entirely failed to produce this effect, nor did she give any sign that she noted the intrusion. This prevented me from catching the glimpse of her face which I so desired, and obliged me to confine myself to a study of her dress and attitude.

The former was very elegant, more elegant than the appearance of her two friends had led me to expect. Though I am far from being an authority on feminine toilets, I yet had experience enough to know that those sweeping folds of spotless satin, with their festoons of lace and loops of shiny trimming,

which it would be folly for me to attempt to describe, represented not only the best efforts of the dressmaker's art, but very considerable means on the part of the woman wearing such a gown. This was a discovery which altered the complexion of my thoughts for a moment; for I had presupposed her a girl of humble means, willing to sacrifice certain scruples to obtain a little extra money. This imposing figure might be that of a millionaire's daughter; how then could I associate her, even in my own mind, with theft? I decided that I must see her face before giving answer to these doubts.

She did not seem inclined to turn. She had raised the shade from before the wintry panes and was engaged in looking out. Her attitude was not that of one simply enjoying a moment's respite from the dance. It was rather that of an absorbed mind brooding upon what gave little or no pleasure; and as I further gazed and noted the droop of her lovely shoulders and the languor visible in her whole bearing, I began to regard a

glimpse of her features as imperative. Moving forward, I came upon her suddenly.

"Excuse me, Miss Smith," I boldly exclaimed; then paused, for she had turned instinctively and I had seen that for which I had risked this daring move. "Your pardon," I hastily apologized. "I mistook you for another young lady," and drew back with a low bow to let her pass, for I saw that she thought only of escaping both me and the room.

And I did not wonder at this, for her eyes were streaming with tears, and her face, which was doubtless a pretty one under ordinary conditions, looked so distorted with distracting emotions that she was no fit subject for any man's eye, let alone that of a hard-hearted officer of the law on the look-out for the guilty hand which had just appropriated a jewel worth anywhere from eight to ten thousand dollars.

Yet I was glad to see her weep, for only first offenders weep, and first offenders are amenable to influence, especially if they

have been led into wrong by impulse and are weak rather than wicked.

Anxious to make no blunder, I resolved, before proceeding further, to learn what I could of the character and antecedents of the suspected one, and this from the only source which offered—Mr. Deane's affianced.

This young lady was a delicate girl, with a face like a flower. Recognizing her sensitive nature, I approached her with the utmost gentleness. Not seeking to disguise either the nature of my business or my reasons for being in the house, since all this gave me authority, I modulated my tone to suit her gentle spirit, and, above all, I showed the utmost sympathy for her lover, whose rights in the reward had been taken from him as certainly as the jewel had been taken from Mrs. Burton. In this way I gained her confidence, and she was quite ready to listen when I observed:

"There is a young lady here who seems to be in a state of even greater trouble than Mr. Deane. Why is this? You brought her

here. Is her sympathy with Mr. Deane so great as to cause her to weep over his loss?"

"Frances? Oh, no. She likes Mr. Deane and she likes me, but not well enough to cry over our misfortunes. I think she has some trouble of her own."

"One that you can tell me?"

Her surprise was manifest.

"Why do you ask that? What interest have you (called in, as I understand, to recover a stolen jewel) in Frances Glover's personal difficulties?"

I saw that I must make my position perfectly plain.

"Only this. She was seen to pick up something from the driveway, where no one else had succeeded in finding anything."

"She? When? Who saw her?"

"I can not answer all these questions at once," I smiled. "She was seen to do this—no matter by whom,—during your passage from the carriage to the stoop. As you preceded her, you naturally did not observe this action, which was fortunate, perhaps, as you

would scarcely have known what to do or say about it."

"Yes I should," she retorted, with a most unexpected display of spirit. "I should have asked her what she had found and I should have insisted upon an answer. I love my friends, but I love the man I am to marry, better." Here her voice fell and a most becoming blush suffused her cheek.

"Quite right," I assented. "Now will you answer my former question? What troubles Miss Glover? Can you tell me?"

"That I can not. I only know that she has been very silent ever since she left the house. I thought her beautiful new dress would please her, but it does not seem to. She has been unhappy and preoccupied all the evening. She only roused a bit when Mr. Deane showed us the ruby and said—Oh, I forgot!"

"What's that? What have you forgot?"

"What you said just now. I wouldn't add a word—"

"Pardon me!" I smilingly interrupted, looking as fatherly as I could, "but you *have*

added this word and now you must tell me what it means. You were going to say she showed interest in the extraordinary jewel which Mr. Deane took from his pocket and—"

"In what he let fall about the expected reward. That is, she looked eagerly at the ruby and sighed when he acknowledged that he expected it to bring him five hundred dollars before midnight. But any girl of no more means than she might do that. It would not be fair to lay too much stress on a sigh."

"Is not Miss Glover wealthy? She wears a very expensive dress, I observe."

"I know it and I have wondered a little at it, for her father is not called very well off. But perhaps she bought it with her own money; I know she has some; she is an artist in burnt wood."

I let the subject of Miss Glover's dress drop. I had heard enough to satisfy me that my first theory was correct. This young woman, beautifully dressed, and with a face from which the rounded lines of early girlhood had not yet departed, held in her pos-

session, probably at this very moment, Mrs. Burton's magnificent jewel. But where? On her person or hidden in some of her belongings? I remembered the cloak in the closet and thought it wise to assure myself that the jewel was not secreted in this garment, before I proceeded to extreme measures. Mrs. Ashley, upon being consulted, agreed with me as to the desirability of this, and presently I had this poor girl's cloak in my hands.

Did I find the ruby? No; but I found something else tucked away in an inner pocket which struck me as bearing quite pointedly upon this case. It was the bill—crumpled, soiled and tear-stained—of the dress whose elegance had so surprised her friends and made me, for a short time, regard her as the daughter of wealthy parents. An enormous bill, which must have struck dismay to the soul of this self-supporting girl, who probably had no idea of how a French dressmaker can foot up items. Four hundred and fifty dollars! and for one gown! I declare I felt in-

dignant myself and could quite understand why she heaved that little sigh when Mr. Deane spoke of the five hundred dollars he expected from Mrs. Burton, and later, how she came to succumb to the temptation of making the effort to secure this sum for herself when, in following the latter's footsteps up the driveway, she stumbled upon this same jewel fallen, as it were, from his pocket into her very hands. The impulse of the moment was so strong and the consequences so little anticipated!

It is not at all probable that she foresaw he would shout aloud his loss and draw the whole household out on the porch. Of course when he did this, the feasibility of her project was gone, and I only wished that I had been present and able to note her countenance, as, crowded in with others on that windy porch, she watched the progress of the search, which every moment made it not only less impossible for her to attempt the restoration upon which the reward depended, but must have caused her to feel, if

she had been as well brought up as all indications showed, that it was a dishonest act of which she had been guilty and that, willing or not, she must look upon herself as a thief so long as she held the jewel back from Mr. Deane or its rightful owner. But how face the publicity of restoring it now, after this elaborate and painful search, in which even the son of her hostess had taken part?

That would be to proclaim her guilt and thus effectually ruin her in the eyes of everybody concerned. No, she would keep the compromising article a little longer, in the hope of finding some opportunity of returning it without risk to her good name. And so she allowed the search to proceed.

I have entered thus elaborately into the supposed condition of this girl's mind on this critical evening, that you may understand why I felt a certain sympathy for her, which forbade harsh measures. I was sure, from the glimpse I had caught of her face, that she longed to be relieved from the tension she was under, and that she would gladly

rid herself of this valuable jewel if she only knew how. This opportunity I proposed to give her; and this is why, on returning the bill to its place, I assumed such an air of relief on rejoining Mrs. Ashley.

She saw, and drew me aside.

"You have not found it!" she said.

"No," I returned, "but I am positive where it is."

"And where is that?"

"Over Miss Glover's uneasy heart."

Mrs. Ashley turned pale.

"Wait," said I; "I have a scheme for getting it hence without making her shame public. Listen!" and I whispered a few words in her ear.

She surveyed me in amazement for a moment, then nodded, and her face lighted up.

"You are certainly earning your reward," she declared; and summoning her son, who was never far away from her side, she whispered her wishes. He started, bowed and hurried from the room.

By this time my business in the house was well-known to all, and I could not appear in hall or parlor without a great silence falling upon every one present, followed by a breaking up of the only too small circle of unhappy guests into agitated groups. But I appeared to see nothing of all this till the proper moment, when, turning suddenly upon them all, I cried out cheerfully, but with a certain deference I thought would please them:

"Ladies and gentlemen: I have an interesting fact to announce. The snow which was taken up from the driveway has been put to melt in the great feed caldron over the stable fire. We expect to find the ruby at the bottom, and Mrs. Ashley invites you to be present at its recovery. It has now stopped snowing and she thought you might enjoy the excitement of watching the water ladled out."

A dozen girls bounded forward.

"Oh, yes, what fun! where are our cloaks—our rubbers?"

Two only stood hesitating. One of these

was Mr. Deane's lady love and the other her friend, Miss Glover. The former, perhaps, secretly wondered. The latter—but I dared not look long enough or closely enough in her direction to judge just what her emotions were. Presently these, too, stepped forward into the excited circle of young people, and were met by the two maids who were bringing in their wraps. Amid the bustle which now ensued, I caught sight of Mr. Deane's face peering from an open doorway. It was all alive with hope. I also perceived a lady looking down from the second story, who, I felt sure, was Mrs. Burton herself. Evidently my confident tone had produced more effect than the words themselves. Every one looked upon the jewel as already recovered and regarded my invitation to the stable as a ruse by which I hoped to restore universal good feeling by giving them all a share in my triumph.

All but one! Nothing could make Miss Glover look otherwise than anxious, restless and unsettled, and though she followed in the

wake of the rest, it was with hidden face and lagging step, as if she recognized the whole thing as a farce and doubted her own power to go through it calmly.

"Ah, ha! my lady," thought I, "only be patient and you will see what I shall do for you." And indeed I thought her eye brightened as we all drew up around the huge caldron standing full of water over the stable stove. As pains had already been taken to put out the fire in this stove, the ladies were not afraid of injuring their dresses and consequently crowded as close as their numbers would permit. Miss Glover especially stood within reach of the brim, and as soon as I noted this, I gave the signal which had been agreed upon between Mr. Ashley and myself. Instantly the electric lights went out, leaving the place in total darkness.

A scream from the girls, a burst of hilarious laughter from their escorts, mingled with loud apologies from their seemingly mischievous host, filled up the interval of darkness which I had insisted should not be too

soon curtailed; then the lights glowed as suddenly as they had gone out, and while the glare was fresh on every face, I stole a glance at Miss Glover to see if she had made good use of the opportunity just accorded for ridding herself of the jewel by dropping it into the caldron. If she had, both her troubles and mine were at an end; if she had not, then I need feel no further scruple in approaching her with the direct question I had hitherto found it so difficult to put.

She stood with both hands grasping her cloak which she had drawn tightly about the rich folds of her new and expensive dress; but her eyes were fixed straight before her with a soft light in their depths which made her positively beautiful.

The jewel is in the pot, I inwardly decided, and ordered the two waiting stablemen to step forward with their ladles. Quickly those ladles went in, but before they could be lifted out dripping, half the ladies had scurried back, afraid of injury to their pretty dresses. But they soon sidled forward again, and

watched with beaming eyes the slow but sure emptying of the great caldron at whose bottom they anticipated finding the lost jewel.

As the ladles were plunged deeper and deeper, the heads drew closer and so great was the interest shown, that the busiest lips forgot to chatter, and eyes, whose only business up till now had been to follow with shy curiosity every motion made by their handsome young host, now settled on the murky depths of the great pot whose bottom was almost in sight.

As I heard the ladles strike this bottom, I instinctively withdrew a step in anticipation of the loud hurrah which would naturally hail the first sight of the lost ruby. Conceive, then, my chagrin, my bitter and mortified disappointment, when, after one look at the broad surface of the now exposed bottom, the one shout which rose was:

"Nothing!"

I was so thoroughly put out that I did not wait to hear the loud complaints which burst

from every lip. Drawing Mr. Ashley aside (who, by the way, seemed as much affected as myself by the turn affairs had taken) I remarked to him that there was only one course left open to us.

"And what is that?"

"To ask Miss Glover to show me what she picked up from your driveway."

"And if she refuses?"

"To take her quietly with me to the station, where we have women who can make sure that the ruby is not on her person."

Mr. Ashley made an involuntary gesture of strong repugnance.

"Let us pray that it will not come to that," he objected hoarsely. "Such a fine figure of a girl! Did you notice how bright and happy she looked when the lights sprang up? I declare she struck me as lovely."

"So she did me, and caused me to draw some erroneous conclusions. I shall have to ask you to procure me an interview with her as soon as we return to the house."

"She shall meet you in the library."

But when, a few minutes later, she joined me in the room just designated and I had full opportunity for reading her countenance, I own that my task became suddenly hateful to me. She was not far from my own daughter's age and, had it not been for her furtive look of care, appeared almost as blooming and bright. Would it ever come to pass that a harsh man of the law would feel it his duty to speak to my Flora as I must now speak to the young girl before me? The thought made me inwardly recoil and it was in as gentle a manner as possible that I made my bow and began with the following remark:

"I hope you will pardon me, Miss Glover—I am told that is your name. I hate to disturb your pleasure—" (this with the tears of alarm and grief rising in her eyes) "but you can tell me something which will greatly simplify my task and possibly put matters in such shape that you and your friends can be released to your homes."

"I?"

She stood before me with amazed eyes, the

color rising in her cheeks. I had to force my next words, which, out of consideration for her, I made as direct as possible.

"Yes, miss. What was the article you were seen to pick up from the driveway soon after leaving your carriage?"

She started, then stumbled backward, tripping in her long train.

"I pick up?" she murmured. Then with a blush, whether of anger or pride I could not tell, she coldly answered: "Oh, that was something of my own,—something I had just dropped. I had rather not tell you what it was."

I scrutinized her closely. She met my eyes squarely, yet not with just the clear light I should, remembering Flora, have been glad to see there.

"I think it would be better for you to be entirely frank," said I. "It was the only article known to have been picked up from the driveway after Mr. Deane's loss of the ruby; and though we do not presume to say that it was the ruby, yet the matter would look clear-

er to us all if you would frankly state what this object was."

Her whole body seemed to collapse and she looked as if about to sink.

"Oh, where is Minnie? Where is Mr. Deane?" she moaned, turning and staring at the door, as if she hoped they would fly to her aid. Then, in a burst of indignation which I was fain to believe real, she turned on me with the cry: "It was a bit of paper which I had thrust into the bosom of my gown. It fell out—"

"Your dressmaker's bill?" I intimated.

She stared, laughed hysterically for a moment, then sank upon a near-by sofa, sobbing spasmodically.

"Yes," she cried, after a moment; "my dressmaker's bill. You seem to know all my affairs." Then suddenly, and with a startling impetuosity, which drew her to her feet: "Are you going to tell everybody that? Are you going to state publicly that Miss Glover brought an unpaid bill to the party and that because Mr. Deane was unfortunate enough

or careless enough to drop and lose the jewel he was bringing to Mrs. Burton, she is to be looked upon as a thief, because she stooped to pick up this bill which had slipped inadvertently from its hiding-place? I shall die if you do," she cried. "I shall die if it is already known," she pursued, with increasing emotion. "Is it? Is it?"

Her passion was so great, so much greater than any likely to rise in a breast wholly innocent, that I began to feel very sober.

"No one but Mrs. Ashley and possibly her son know about the bill," said I, "and no one shall, if you will go with that lady to her room, and make plain to her, in the only way you can, that the extremely valuable article which has been lost to-night is not in your possession."

She threw up her arms with a scream. "Oh, what a horror! I can not! I can not! Oh, I shall die of shame! My father! My mother!" And she burst from the room like one distraught.

But in another moment she came cringing

back. "I can not face them," she said. "They all believe it; they will always believe it unless I submit—Oh, why did I ever come to this dreadful place? Why did I order this hateful dress which I can never pay for and which, in spite of the misery it has caused me, has failed to bring me the—" She did not continue. She had caught my eye and seen there, perhaps, some evidence of the pity I could not but experience for her. With a sudden change of tone she advanced upon me with the appeal: "Save me from this humiliation. I have not seen the ruby. I am as ignorant of its whereabouts as—as Mr. Ashley himself. Won't you believe me? Won't they be satisfied if I swear—"

I was really sorry for her. I began to think too that some dreadful mistake had been made. Her manner seemed too ingenuous for guilt. Yet where could that ruby be, if not with this young girl? Certainly, all other possibilities had been exhausted, and her story of the bill, even if accepted, would never quite exonerate her from secret sus-

picion while that elusive jewel remained unfound.

"You give me no hope," she moaned. "I must go out before them all and ask to have it proved that I am no thief. Oh, if God would have pity—"

"Or some one would find—Halloo! What's that?"

A shout had risen from the hall beyond.

She gasped and we both plunged forward. Mr. Ashley, still in his overcoat, stood at the other end of the hall, and facing him were ranged the whole line of young people whom I had left scattered about in the various parlors. I thought he looked peculiar; certainly his appearance differed from that of a quarter of an hour before, and when he glanced our way and saw who was standing with me in the library doorway, his voice took on a tone which made me doubt whether he was about to announce good news or bad.

But his first word settled that question.

"Rejoice with me!" he cried. "*The ruby has been found!* Do you want to see the cul-

prit?—for there is a culprit. We have him at the door; shall we bring him in?"

"Yes, yes," cried several voices, among them that of Mr. Deane, who now strode forward with beaming eyes and instinctively lifted hand. But some of the ladies looked frightened, and Mr. Ashley, noting this, glanced for encouragement toward us.

He seemed to find it in Miss Glover's eyes. She had quivered and nearly fallen at that word *found*, but had drawn herself up by this time and was awaiting his further action in a fever of relief and hope which perhaps no one but myself could fully appreciate.

"A vile thief! A most unconscionable rascal!" vociferated Mr. Ashley. "You must see him, mother; you must see him, ladies, else you will not realize our good fortune. Open the door there and bring in the robber!"

At this command, uttered in ringing tones, the huge leaves of the great front door swung slowly forward, revealing the sturdy forms of the two stablemen holding down by main force the towering figure of—*a horse!*

The scream of astonishment which went up from all sides, united to Mr. Ashley's shout of hilarity, caused the animal, unused, no doubt, to drawing-rooms, to rear to the length of his bridle. At which Mr. Ashley laughed again and gaily cried:

"Confound the fellow! Look at him, mother; look at him, ladies! Do you not see guilt written on his brow? It is he who has made us all this trouble. First, he must needs take umbrage at the two lights with which we presumed to illuminate our porch; then, envying Mrs. Burton her ruby and Mr. Deane his reward, seek to rob them both by grinding his hoofs all over the snow of the driveway till he came upon the jewel which Mr. Deane had dropped from his pocket, and taking it up in a ball of snow, secrete it in his left hind shoe,—where it might be yet, if Mr. Spencer—" here he bowed to a strange gentleman who at that moment entered—"had not come himself for his daughters, and, going first to the stable, found his horse so restless and seemingly lame—(there, boys, you may

take the wretch away now and harness him, but first hold up that guilty left hind hoof for the ladies to see)—that he stooped to examine him, and so came upon *this*."

Here the young gentleman brought forward his hand. In it was a nondescript little wad, well soaked and shapeless; but, once he had untied the kid, such a ray of rosy light burst from his outstretched palm that I doubt if a single woman there noted the clatter of the retiring beast or the heavy clang made by the two front doors as they shut upon the *robber*. Eyes and tongues were too busy, and Mr. Ashley, realizing, probably, that the interest of all present would remain, for a few minutes at least, with this marvelous jewel so astonishingly recovered, laid it, with many expressions of thankfulness, in Mrs. Burton's now eagerly outstretched palm, and advancing toward us, paused in front of Miss Glover and eagerly held out his hand.

"Congratulate me," he prayed. "All our troubles are over—Oh, what now!"

The poor young thing, in trying to smile,

had turned as white as a sheet. Before either of us could interpose an arm, she had slipped to the floor in a dead faint. With a murmur of pity and possibly of inward contrition, he stooped over her and together we carried her into the library, where I left her in his care, confident, from certain indications, that my presence would not be greatly missed by either of them.

Whatever hope I may have had of reaping the reward offered by Mrs. Ashley was now lost, but, in the satisfaction I experienced at finding this young girl as innocent as my Flora, I did not greatly care.

Well, it all ended even more happily than may here appear. The horse not putting in his claim to the reward, and Mr. Spencer repudiating all right to it, it was paid in full to Mr. Deane, who went home in as buoyant a state of mind as was possible to him after the great anxieties of the preceding two hours. Miss Glover was sent back by the Ashleys in their own carriage and I was told that Mr. Ashley declined to close the carriage door

upon her till she had promised to come again the following night.

Anxious to make such amends as I personally could for my share in the mortification to which she had been subjected, I visited her in the morning, with the intention of offering a suggestion or two in regard to that little bill. But she met my first advance with a radiant smile and the glad exclamation:

"Oh, I have settled all that! I have just come from Madame Duprè's. I told her that I had never imagined the dress could possibly cost more than a hundred dollars, and I offered her that sum if she would take the garment back. And she did, she did, and I shall never have to wear that dreadful satin again."

I made a note of this dressmaker's name. She and I may have a bone to pick some day. But I said nothing to Miss Glover. I merely exclaimed:

"And to-night?"

"Oh, I have an old spotted muslin which, with a few natural flowers, will make me look

festive enough. One does not need fine clothes when one is—happy."

The dreamy far-off smile with which she finished the sentence was more eloquent than words, and I was not surprised when some time later I read of her engagement to Mr. Ashley.

But it was not till she could sign herself with his name that she told me just what underlay the misery of that night. She had met Harrison Ashley more than once before, and, though she did not say so, had evidently conceived an admiration for him which made her especially desirous of attracting and pleasing him. Not understanding the world very well, certainly having very little knowledge of the tastes and feelings of wealthy people, she conceived that the more brilliantly she was attired the more likely she would be to please this rich young man. So in a moment of weakness she decided to devote all her small savings (a hundred dollars, as we know) to buying a gown such as she felt she could appear in at his house without shame.

It came home, as dresses from French dressmakers are very apt to do, just in time for her to put it on for the party. The bill came with it and when she saw the amount —it was all itemized and she could find no fault with anything but the summing up— she was so overwhelmed that she nearly fainted. But she could not give up her ball; so she dressed herself, and, being urged all the time to hurry, hardly stopped to give one look at the new and splendid gown which had cost so much. The bill—the incredible, the enormous bill—was all she could think of, and the figures, which represented nearly her whole year's earnings, danced constantly before her eyes. How to pay it—but she could not pay it, nor could she ask her father to do so. She was ruined; but the ball, and Mr. Ashley—these still awaited her; so presently she worked herself up to some anticipation of enjoyment, and, having thrown on her cloak, was turning down her light preparatory to departure, when her eye fell on the bill lying open on her dresser.

It would never do to leave it there—never do to leave it anywhere in her room. There were prying eyes in the house, and she was as ashamed of that bill as she might have been of a contemplated theft. So she tucked it in her corsage and went down to join her friends in the carriage.

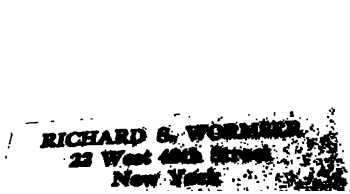
The rest we know, all but one small detail which turned to gall whatever enjoyment she was able to get out of the early evening. There was a young girl present, dressed in a simple muslin gown. While looking at it and inwardly contrasting it with her own splendor, Mr. Ashley passed by with another gentleman and she heard him say:

"How much better young girls look in simple white than in the elaborate silks only suitable for their mothers!"

Thoughtless words, possibly forgotten as soon as uttered, but they sharply pierced this already sufficiently stricken and uneasy breast and were the cause of the tears which had aroused my suspicion when I came upon her

in the library, standing with her face to the night.

But who can say whether, if the evening had been devoid of these occurrences and no emotions of contrition and pity had been awakened in her behalf in the breast of her chivalrous host, she would ever have become Mrs. Ashley?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